

# GETTING TO KNOW YOURSELF: LEARN TO READ SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND LEARN TO THINK ON THE EVERYDAY LIFE THROUGH THE RESEARCH

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## Abstract

The aim of this text is to approach the two paths we have found in the School of Education and Social Sciences (ESECS), Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (IPL) and Research Center of Identities and Diversities (CIID) to turn what is too often separate as one: education and research.

One route has been through the courses that we taught, relating to the anthropology of education, in particular, where we look for students to learn, to read social reality, to think and investigate daily life and do research on educational processes, not only at school, but also through the Internet, by analyzing the children's games, through the analysis of family relationships and how they educate children. The idea is unscholars education.

The second way we found to construct the bridge between education and research is through work we have going on with adults returning to school after they have left, compulsory schooling, and those between the ages of 30 and 60 years old. By investigation of listening, powered by ethnographic research and ethnographic interviews, we placed these adults juxtaposed to discuss issues and to think that we tried changing world views, either in childhood or in adolescence, both in elementary school, and now returning to school (University).

Keywords: Education, research, self-training.

## 1 THINKING ABOUT SCHOOL AND LIFE

The Anthropology of Education, which we defend, fits in ethnographic methodology of educational contexts in school, out of school, family, leisure, etc.. But it wants also to understand the cultural changes that occur in the lives of these individuals as a result of convergences and divergences of view in the journeys of life based on their culture. It has been developed through training of the future teachers and the training of social workers and educators.

In it there is a great emphasis in the study of students, teachers and social workers through their educational biographies, to understand how they became what they are contemporaneously (Vieira, 2009, 2011).

In today's modern societies the weight is lower in determining personal identity. The Society offers support to facilitate the growth of each individual. Self and heteroformation following together but, ultimately, it is each person who builds oneself and this is not the product of chemical paper pattern of culture of the school culture and personality (cf. Vieira, 2009; Trindade and Vieira, 2008 ).

Education not only refers to school. If the ordinary meaning of the word's own Education and Education at Sciences, many times, lead to the teaching and learning to master classes and schools, the truth is that anthropology has noted that education gives children and young people only a small contribution to acculturation and identity construction.<sup>i</sup> "*Learning, remembering, talking, imagining, all this is made possible by building a culture*" (Bruner, 2000: 11) [1]. And the child does not fall parachuted into school. The child comes to school already with a whole route of cultural construction that gives you an understanding of life and an epistemology which sits as a student of the school (Iturra, 1990a and b). Family, the street, the neighborhood, teaches them knowledge and their identity which is important to know how to recontextualize in the school learning system.

In the Portuguese context there are major cultural discontinuities between school and home for many students. The purpose of studying the educational process is not synonymous with studying the teaching and learning in school, Jerome Bruner, who has traveled from cognitive psychology to cultural psychology and has thus made a great approach to Anthropology<sup>ii</sup>, a work dedicated to the culture of education, says that " our *times are changing and marked by deep conjectures about what*

*the schools should do for those who sign up or are forced to sign up in them [...] and that what we decide to do in school only makes sense when viewed as the wider picture of what society wants to achieve through investment in education of young people. [...] His central thesis (the book Education and Culture) is that culture shapes the mind, it equips us with the tools we use to build not only our worlds but our actual conceptions about ourselves and our faculties*" (Bruner, 2000: 9-11) [2].

So we talk about education between school and home. Therefore the training of teachers, educators and social workers must invest in research on (re)constructions of identity training as a subject and that is essentially reflective. Therefore "the school has first to investigate seriously the cultural categories of local people before teaching the knowledge of the bourgeoisie which does not relate to the understanding of a mind that believes." (Iturra, 1990b: 97) [3].

On this assumption, we therefore sought to understand the education of the student's point of view that so often is unknown. Therein lies the importance of ethnographic and ethnobiographic education. And here it seems important to consider the life histories (self)reflection and (auto)formation (cf. Josso, 2002 and Nóvoa, 1991).

It is urgent to think in training, always, and not just adapt to a reform that imposes a given time and normatively. But in training, based mainly on research - for example in the research of life histories of the students one has, the educational backgrounds from where they come from, the teacher's own autobiography and ones colleagues, to know who one is, who one wants to be and who the others are. Finally, a continued training also based on the reflection:

*"The training is not built on the accumulation (courses of, know-how or techniques), but through a work of critical reflexivity on the practices of permanent (re)construction of personal identity. It is so important to invest in Guild up the person and give a emphasis learning experience."* (Nóvoa, 1991: 23) [4].

It is in this perspective that people, students, future educators and future social workers, teachers, and teachers who being adults have professional, cultural and cognitive experience, and thus an unconscious practice, "habitus of Bourdieu" (1997), has to think of a training that passes through reflection of their own practices and contexts in which they act and acted to the ethnographic present. Perrenoud (1993: 35) [5] reports that changing practices is precisely for this transformation of habitus, joining others *"the availability of models of action [...]"*, because the pedagogical practice *"is a never mere achievement of revenue, didactical models, diagrams conscious action."*

It is also from this assumption that Gaston Pineau (1990) considered reflection on the life history as a fundamental way to bring changes in representations and practices of teachers: *"Make your life story is less then remembering that happening. You rely on the past to take off and get full of contradictions movements to begin using them on a way"* (Pineau, 1990: 98) [6].

## **2 THINKING IN GROUP**

The research that we have been developing on the path of some adults who enrolled in higher education after the age of 30 and after more than 10 years away from school, allowed us to connect also the education research, listening to these students to discuss themes thrown into a group interview, the focus group, where they form a questioning of themselves and others, which they rediscover themselves and the researcher knows the life projects and the transformations of those who were investigated by their own voices.

After two ethnobiographics interviews (Spradlay, 1979) conducted individually to six undergraduate after-work students of the School of Education and Social Sciences, Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, followed by the focus group.

Morgan (1997) refers to the focus group as a qualitative method of data collection, which can be used in a preliminary stage of research, more quantitative framework in order to serve the information gathered to develop questionnaires or specific programs; or used to complement other techniques such as participant observation, personal interviews, an ethnographic perspective.

*"In these combined uses of qualitative methods, the goal is to use each method so that it contributes something unique to the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon under study."* (Morgan, 1997: 3) [7].

Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook (2007), indicate that the focus group should involve between 8 to 12 participants led by a moderator who promotes interaction and assures the discussion of issues or topics posted. Its duration should not exceed two and half hours.

Barbour (2007) defends the use of different moderators that have the advantage because they can generate data that are different in content and form. Regarding the number of participants, the author says there is no magic number, market research emphasized that the number should be between 10 and 12. However, what should determine the number of participants is the ability, the skill of the moderator, and the level of complexity desired. *"In social science research we are generally interested in exploring more in depth meanings participants and the ways in which perspectives are socially constructed. [...] I would argue that a maximum of eight participants are challenging generally quite enough."* (Barbour, 2007: 60) [8].

In our investigation we counted six participants, two moderators and a researcher and the conversation lasted 2 hours and 23 minutes.

In the first time we started to do a self-presentation. Students who hadn't known each other got the opportunity to do it, evaluated who were the other interviewees, the moderators/researchers realized that there were people who already knew each other, due to being students of the same courses (social education and social service). An investigator already knew all the students because they already had two interviews with her and only one of the moderator know the students. The other moderator didn't know any student, who brought some advantages to embody and highlight some issues. The significance of the objectivity and detachment in the questioning, and also the necessary empathy was evident here.

After the first question / reflection from the moderator: *"The person who is sitting here today, on a Friday evening, is different from who was here three years ago in college? Or not?"*

We noticed who were the people that were more comfortable and also more extroverted to start the discussion. This shows that in a focus group, when people do not know each other, there isn't a spontaneous conversation in the first moments, regardless of the topic. There seems to be a first evaluation of oneself and others about the personal interests and ability to communicate and that was visible.

Angela was the first to intervene and did it in a very "comfortable" way and this posture followed her throughout all the focus group. Another participant, Aida, was less outspoken, was reserved but however, every time she intervened, she did it in a pragmatic, contextualized, assertive way and more expressive after the end of the conversation. It seems to have been the best who understood that the major objective of the conversation, was to think about yourself and talk about their concrete changes, compared with the points of views of the others, and when that question was more direct she was the first to intervene and did it spontaneously.

We emphasize it as an advantage of a focus group, the fact that not all participants know each other leads to an increased heterogeneity of responses. This lack of information by the respondents potentiated new discussions, especially on boundaries subjects as limits or as links between the areas of social professions, different in name, but sometimes work in similar matters.

In the final part, the discussion was not anymore about "what the school did to me?" But about "what do the school, the school curriculum make to us as social educators and to you as social workers?" The dialogue has emerged around the boundary of an area of intervention of two social professions, social education and social work courses in the recent tradition of ESECS - School of Education and Social Sciences - whose definitions are sometimes tenuous, in the instructions and that the focus group seemed to have found the space of identification and distinction to better define their profession with the intervention of each other. In this sense, the focus group was important for people to dialogue, which is unusual among University courses.

Another question of the discussions emerged by Madalena was "what to do after the course? How to fill the time? "

*"It's a question that does not worry too much, only a little bit. i.e. do we get used to it, we get addicted to knowledge, in learning more, and now, after the course, how will it be?"* [9]

The presence of an "unknown" and unaware moderator, mentioned earlier by Barbour (2007), raised new issues, more pertinent, less repetitive, which was very positive because it took more reflection on the participants and another dynamic to the interview itself.

We noticed that the reflectivity was not achieved by all the respondents but Angela, Aida, Madalena and Sandra managed to do it. During the conversation, questioning and knowing themselves better, they confirmed who they were and what they wanted to be. However, there were two respondents, José and Isabel, who did not manage to do it, beyond what they had already said in interviews. Compared to the first two interviews, the reflection was lower, although they are extrovert people, and before the focus group starting, they were spontaneous and had the willingness to communicate but during the focus group, they weren't.

Isabel focused more on normative ideas, not so much for the research and the reflection of herself, but more on recommendations how social workers and higher education could help to solve the nation's problems and social inequality. Or she had no more to add or the fact of being with other unknown people limited her reflection? Or was it because it was the end of the day and week and she was tired from work and the training? Or, would it be because she had a problem at work? The truth is that Isabel could not reflect on herself, about the transformation of the school, with the school. So, with her, the focus group did not bring anything new.

In the case of José, who was more restrained in this meeting, it also seems that he tried to show how his speech and thought fit into definitions and models of the lessons received by the teachers who were present (the case of one of the moderators). Has proved to be an attentive student and related the concepts of classes, where one of the moderators is a teacher with what was required to speak, and so in that sense, it was not a reflexive development. It was for him one more way to prove that he is a good student, towards the school form, by using the examples of the models taught in a subject.

Concurrently with these two cases in which the focus group did not bring anything new and didn't manage to obtain great reflexivity, the other participants have rediscovered an more hidden "me", (re)learned to read life and daily life. Angela says that her son and her husband learned how to cook:

*"My son learned how to cook, my husband learned how to cook, my mother in law who was about seventy[...] she encouraged her son to do it because she [mother in law] was already in my house, my father in law had already passed away she was already at my house when she encouraged her son to learn to do things, today my husband is a very good cook. I do not interfere..."*

Sandra talks about reorganization of family dynamics:

*"And so do I, he could already do many things and has always helped me a lot and at first he didn't accept very well my enrollment to the University because I have the habit to do everything on time, everything must be done [...] [but] everything went well and he helps a lot. No doubt, I owe this to them." [10]*

This rediscovery of the more hidden "me" shows that life stories are not individual but familiar and social. The narrator is limited to be only one component of that group (Poirier, 1999: 39). The question of the changes that higher education have brought or not, their lives, all were adamant in stating that there are changes, they acquired another vision of the world, new habits, and idealize new life projects.

*"[...] No doubt that I'm a completely different person, at all levels: personal, professional, desires, projects, dreams, everything changed. [...] Before I entered in College and with no major [plans], I had no plans to enter, my life was spent in work, home, house-work but today I would like to do different things, since I have projects that I liked to implement [...] I'd love to give training, Ilove teaching ..."(Angela) [11].*

This love of teaching was transmitted by some teachers during the degree, a desire, a will that was discovered through the course.

*"I thought I didn't have the capacity, I was not able to match and combine everything, but nowadays almost in the end, I felt, somehow proud of myself because it isn't so difficult. We improve our capacity with the experience combined with theory, and about my self-esteem, of course with no doubt that I feel very different too."(Sandra) [12].*

*"For me it was a personal achievement, however, I notice in myself that I changed in the level of criticism, to be more critical to society, I was a very passive person, everything was ok for me because I thought it would make much difference if I participated in a social level, I think I changed a lot at this level. Now, I think that my opinion counts for something."(Aida) [13].*

In one hand, an enhancement of self concept that leads to the believing of the skills and be aware of the transformation and in the other hand, the development of critical thinking.

"[...] It was a dream that was unfulfilled, wasn't it? It was in standby because I hadn't got the opportunity[...] It was postponed since I was 13,14 years old. [...] And, so things have been happening [...] my biggest problem was in fact the new technologies"(Isabel) [14].

"The only, lets say the biggest difficulty ... I came across with the academic level was the domain of new technologies "(José) [15].

New technologies appear as the new literacy, responsible from the moment that we go to College.

This allowed, apart from scientific knowledge gained, an intercultural and intergenerational sharing. Madalena highlights her great relationship with the younger people and her acceptance among all people, despite of being one of the oldest in the class.

"My relationship with the younger ones was excellent, I think there was a sharing here, it was very enriching in one hand, [...] I was very well accepted by the younger colleagues, I felt absolutely no constraints, I learned a lot from them, but I also felt that they eventually learned with me and this sharing was very enriching. They themselves also carry the "baggage" of life"(Madalena) [16].

Angela points out that despite the initial fear, because she was more than 40 years old, she felt perfectly integrated.

"[...] Initially, I had some fear because of my age, I felt a little displaced and... moreover it was not me that I enrolled myself in College but it was my son that signed me up and I could only laugh just thinking in going to a classroom with boys and girls, and what would I do among them? But in the end we don't feel anything like that..."(Angela) [17].

José has the opposite point of view when he signed up he created an expectation that the social relations in College would be friendship, companionship, solidarity, without groups, a legal union. However, he says:

"[...] there were some things that shocked me [...] it is made up by individuals from a age above, 20 years. And I was very shocked [emphasizes the adjective] when I saw certain behaviors in the classroom that not evening the primary school kids behave that way [laughs]. [...] Maybe because I came from the seminary and had a certain vision, and when I arrived at University and we all had the same common purpose, that there were a united group, I finally noticed what I called it academic tribalism. Thus, in the beginning, as we are in trouble, everybody join together to see how it works, as t time pass they begin to form hermitic groups. [...] Those chapels that are formed in the University that I could never imagined it could happen, I thought we were all brothers"(José) [18].

This knowledge of yourself and others, the individual and collective transformation led also to learn how to live and think about life, the daily life, and find strategies to the professional field. By learning how to live, people discover that, after all, what we thought was an interesting thing, to make known to others to go to University was, after all, a reason that could cause discomfort, tension, and work pressures. This is the case of Angela and Sandra.

"At my professional level, I bought a war, I bought a very big war ... [...] because I work there for 18 years and my leaving time was at six and I used to leave, every day, at 10 at 11 [pm], from the moment that I started to leave at five [17 hours] to be here in Leiria, the work was unfinished, right? I bought a very big war. So big that once the course will finish, the job will finish too ... [...] And note that I am working on a training center which should be the first to encourage me"(Angela) [19].

Moreover, Sandra states that

"I did not create a war, but I'm tested every day in my workplace, to see how far my strength goes.

I'm in a traineeship and also after labor time and they gave me the worst schedule that exists. To achieve compatibility between two things I arrive at work at seven-thirty in the morning, I get up around six in the morning and in the evening I arrive home at around eleven. I have no time for my family, I'm doing the traineeship on Saturday and Sunday. [...] I work in an institution, in IPSS, I'm doing the worst time in order to leave at five o'clock in the afternoon."(Sandra) [20].

To conclude this group interview as a potential form of self-training, the participants noted, in a more reflective way and others less, which:

"Of all these changes that I suffered through the various skills that I was receiving, what most changed was my need of having more knowledge, and which seems that I'm never satisfied, [...] every day I give more value to people that I know, to my family, to my experiences that I had, so nothing changed."(Aida) [21].

"[...] *The course was very good, I'm richer, so there is no doubt, but in practice I continue to have the enormous need to help people and I fight everyday against the system that is not suitable for what we have learned in the course.*" (Isabel) [22].

"[...] *Finally I start at this age, to have some notion of who I am, where I come from and where I go.*" (José) [22].

"[...] *What have changed in me? I think that everything has changed!*" (Madalena) [23].

"My knowledge has increased, however, even with this increasing I am aware that I know very little. [...] Although some knowledge acquired, I feel I have much to learn, I feel I know very little about the scale of knowledge. Above all this ... " (Sandra) [24].

"[...] I am sure I have changed a lot, I realized that I know nothing, today I realize that the more I'm in school, the more I want to know, and the more I have to learn because we're obtaining that awareness of things." (Angela) [25].

### 3 SOME CONCLUSIONS

The ethnobiographics interviews (Spradley, 1979) and focus groups (Barbour, 2007) not only allow to obtain information, to learn more about how others but also doing training in the way that it is the other, the student, teacher, social worker, or any other qualified person, can self-form as an access to dimensions which are not previously rationalized. These interviews, not deeply unstructured, and using the categories and interests of others, allow the interviewee to make sense of what was never said, thought, explained and structured (Woods, 1999; Vieira, 2009).

The social actors, made hermeneutics of themselves, reflect themselves on our intentions and about themselves. They are therefore also researchers of themselves. They also have theory. The role of the researcher is not finding with magical arts the true meaning of the practices of people that have studied. Through ethnobiographical interviews, leading to the construction of life stories, and through a focus group, we try to show interest in the interactional object of study to know the intentions of the investigator towards the two that agree to have access to interpretative dimensions that were not yet clarified for both.

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<sup>i</sup> Note the book collection of educational anthropology, published in Portugal by Escher and the End of the Century, and coordinated by Raul Iturra, who goes by the name of "learning beyond the school." On this issue, the presentation of the collection is remarkable: "The objective of this collection is to present the knowledge that people obtain from their social experience to supplement what the school does not teach: the teaching of oral transmission of cultural ideas that knowledge does not incorporate the teaching scholar. "

<sup>ii</sup> Bruner himself is that in another work, "*Acts of Meaning*," points out that "to know the man, it is necessary to see it on the background of the animal kingdom from which it evolved in the context of culture and language that provide the symbolic world in which he lives, and in light of the development processes that are converging these two powerful forces. At the time we were convinced that psychology could not do everything alone. [...] And in the midst of all this was founded the "Center for Cognitive Studies" [...]. I mention it here only to express a debt to another community that convinced me that the boundaries between fields such as psychology, anthropology, linguistics and philosophy were more matters of administrative convenience than of intellectual substance" (Bruner, 1997: 15-16). Going forward, states that "today are thriving centers of cultural psychology, cognitive anthropology and interpretive, cognitive linguistics and, above all, a thriving global enterprise that is engaged, as never before since Kant, the philosophy of mind and language. It's probably a sign of the times that the two nominees for the conference Jerusalem-Harvard in the academic year 1989/90 represent, each in its own way, this tradition - Prof. Geertz in anthropology and I in psychology" (Bruner, 1997: 16).

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