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TO BECOME A TEACHER IS A METAPHOR. METAMORPHOSES IN TEACHERS' IDENTITY.

Abstract

By analyzing the life-histories of teachers, this paper attempts to describe the ways they lived their experiences from childhood to adulthood and how this process has affected their attitudes towards diversity. It also seeks to examine how these life-histories are conveyed and enacted in the classroom, and hence the possible ways teachers can integrate their cultural knowledge into the teaching-learning process.

Socialization and learning experiences throughout life cause metamorphoses in their personal identities.

Among the different forms of cultural metamorphoses occurring in teachers, this paper focuses on what I describe as *cultural transfusion*. By means of this process, I analyze two tendencies in personal identity: the 'intercultural *trânsfuga*' and the '*oblato*', two concepts to be explained in my text.

The former tendency among teachers integrates the culture of origin into the emerging cultural identity, both implicitly and explicitly. The latter denies the culture of origin and idealizes the target culture as its aim in life. Thus, this tendency leads to a 'monocultural' teacher, as I shall argue.

1. Teaching and Learning

" A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it.

And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture.

And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it.

And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold." (St. Luke 8, 5-8).

It is relatively easy to understand that there can be teaching without learning and learning without teaching governed by objectives (Iturra, 1994). The effectiveness of the teaching-learning process is a result of the personal circumstances and way of being of the teacher, which go beyond being professionally trained or not. Before beginning teacher training, some people will already possess certain socio-cultural characteristics, such as a willingness to enter into dialogue, an ability to empathize, and an aptitude for intercultural communication, which will make them more suitable to take up the profession.

The main idea of my message is therefore the following: a teacher is an individual and was one before becoming professionally qualified. Their teaching activity is a mixture of rationality and emotion, of improvisation and planning. It is a way of being (*um modo de ser*¹) which is often subconscious (Bourdieu, 1997). Indeed, we do not always rationalize what we do in our teaching activities.

“Painters do not copy what they observe, but make a careful selection, the elements they select being endowed with significance, and having even greater impact by being at times irrational ... What visual artists like painters want to teach is easy to understand but difficult to explain. They themselves have difficulty in explaining why they interpret their experiences through form and color, and not through words”. (Highet, 1951, cited in Woods, Peter (1999))

This position would appear to be the antithesis of scientific certainty. It is also as if part of teaching consists in ‘not knowing’. In contrast to an emphasis on rationality, teaching appears to have an emotional side, an ‘intelligence of the heart’.

At the same time, teaching is usually discussed in terms of the intentions and activities of the teacher. But students are not passive recipients of the teacher’s message. It is not enough to sell Latin, give lectures and teach wonderful classes. The final aim is to make a difference, to sow a seed that will grow into something, that restructures knowledge and educates. The system should perhaps be more about learning than about teaching. Moreover, it would appear that there are people who, while not being teachers by profession, are better at teaching, or at least at making others learn.

2. Learning involves departing

“[...] A child leaves the family home; a departure: a second birth. All learning requires this journey with the other and with otherness, but during this journey many things change” (Serres, 1993:59).

Indeed, all learning involves a kind of metamorphosis, a cross-breeding, even if people may not be aware of it. Some will use the acknowledgement of otherness, experienced or observed, to strengthen the identity of the ‘I’ and ‘us’ and to reinforce feelings and attitudes which can at

¹ This concept is borrowed from the work of João Lobo Antunes (1996). On re-reading the texts included in his work *Um modo de ser*, João Lobo Antunes discovers that “only now do I understand that all the texts, in one way or another, contain some biographical element and reflect, with varying clarity, my way of being a doctor, necessarily inspired by the philosophical stance of the profession, and which in fact I had always wanted to share with others” (p.10).

times be ethnocentric or xenophobic, falling into the habit of segregating cultural differences. They may accept the social reality as multicultural but not that there can be any intercommunication. Others will use such acknowledgement to relativize their own world and become more intercultural.

Circumstances and life experiences vary enormously, as do the adults involved in the process of constructing this or that way of being and of thinking.

By studying the different life histories of people who are now adults, teachers by profession, but who are obviously also individuals with varied social roles, I have tried to reconstruct the specific journeys and experiences that, from childhood through to adulthood, have contributed to the development of their attitudes towards human diversity (in some cases merely multicultural and in others intercultural), including of course their social behavior and habits.

3. Cultural metamorphosis

For many Portuguese, to be seen as successful citizens within a globalized culture often means breaking out of the narrow confines of rural life and doing well at school which, being decontextualized from everyday life in the majority of cases, brings about a cultural metamorphosis or even a cultural transfusion in the life of the individual. Success at school provides access to the way of thinking of educated culture, of the written word, of uniformity, formality and abstraction, and at times leads to the abandonment of everyday culture in favor of scientific rationality.

Access to the dominant culture can lead to at least two types of transformation. One can ignore and forget the cultural past of one's origins, which produces a cultural mind-set² able to comprehend life; or on the other hand, one can make use of the richness of the original culture as experience, as one among many types of everyday life, leading to teaching methods based on cultural relativism.

The first model applies to people, professionals, teachers, who are afraid to speak of their 'I' since this would mean laying bare their whole cultural background. They never speak of their origins, where they were born, grew up and lived, before schooling gave them a passport to written culture. Outwardly, they tend to give the impression that they are the product of the target culture only. In their teaching methodology, they use neither elements nor contexts from their childhood and culture of origin, even when these may be the same as those of the students they are teaching. This is the *oblato* model.

² This concept is from Raúl Iturra (1990).

I call the second model of cultural transfusion the **intercultural *trânsfuga***. This type accepts the new but does not reject the old. They incorporate the acquired culture into their personal universe, which gives a new dimension to the culture of origin, but does not destroy or replace it. Rather it gives it a third dimension, resulting from the comparative integration of the ‘I’ with the ‘other’, ‘us’ with ‘them’.

Teachers of the intercultural *trânsfuga* type accept that they are hybrid creations and appear to have no problem in travelling back to contexts of their past whenever this is essential in order to teach children to learn, children who are today culturally similar to their own childhoods³.

4. Life journeys and professional identity

Maria

Maria was born in Guarda in 1943. She was the only daughter of a rural couple who had four children. Her mother died when she was eleven. Her father remarried seven years later, when Maria was in her final year of primary teacher training, and another child was born of that marriage. Only one brother, now dead, was older than her; he helped her greatly in her studies and, according to her, was “*brother, father, mother, everything ...*”. Today she lives on the outskirts of Leiria, approximately one kilometer from the school where she works. Her husband works in a bank and they have three children, all with university degrees.

In the beginning, her idea was not to be a teacher: “*When I was a little girl, like all girls of my age, of that age, my dream was to be a film actress. Cinema was at its height. Then, when I was a bit older, since I had always read a lot, one day I came across a book about a famous nurse called Florence ... (That’s how I am, a bit romantic), and that filled me full of ideas and ... [...]*.”

In the meantime, I finished fifth grade and at the time there were few nursing schools. I know I still planned to go to the nursing school at Santa Maria in Lisbon because it was residential. The problem was that my father was giving me a hard time because at the time nursing had a very bad reputation. I just wanted to be a nurse ... you know, they had to have contact with men and so they had the reputation of all being very flighty. And my father said: “Don’t even think about it!”. And I cried, and cried and cried. [...] So my father said: “If you want to study, you’ll have

³ For a deeper treatment of this and other models of teachers’ professional identities, as well as their greater or lesser ability to construct an intercultural pedagogy, see Vieira (1999), a work which is based mainly on my doctoral thesis in Social Anthropology.

to be a teacher.” The thing was that there was a teaching training college in Guarda. And I became a teacher because of that [...]

I always studied diligently. I went to the teacher training college and things just continued from there. When I started going to schools, for teaching practice in schools, I began to realize that I really liked it. [...]. I was well known for really having a way with kids. [...].

From my teaching placement onwards, I realized that I liked being a teacher. And I have never regretted it. [...].

There were no teachers in Maria’s family. Her father was an only child, and her mother only had one brother. None of them were involved in school life. The whole question had much to do with there being a primary teaching training college in Guarda and her being from Guarda: “*So I wouldn’t have to leave home to study. It wasn’t just a question of money, but more the fact of being a girl going out alone, and that was a big problem for my father.*”

Today Maria says that she prefers being involved with ordinary people - “*as I have already said, I prefer talking to ordinary people rather than so-called ‘refined’ people. I don’t like ‘refined’ people much...*” She prefers to work in villages or the suburbs. This preference possibly derives from the fact that she is a *trânsfuga* who does not deny her past and who does not identify with elitism either. Maria is much closer to the linguistic code, cognitive grammar, attitudes, and ethics of country people than those of city dwellers. This means that she not only empathizes with underprivileged pupils, to whom she gives affection, help and protection, but it also makes her more active and able to communicate with the parents of such pupils. Instead of a break with the past and a communication gap, she manages to achieve continuity and the support and involvement of parents, in contrast to what happens with teachers who are detached, even though many of the latter come from similar backgrounds, as is the case of Luísa whom I will discuss below.

Maria is the type of person who is a teacher-cum-social worker, like a missionary teacher closely involved in local life: she runs a drama group after classes, used to coach handball, organizes café-concerts for the community at weekends, and so on.

She gets involved with pupils and their families like a member of the family: she is a godmother at pupils’ confirmation ceremonies and visits them later in life. She establishes a very humane relationship, of friendship and affection, based on the pedagogic relationship. She invites pupils to her home during the holidays, sometimes every day for tea. This reminds her of when she was a pupil and used to love going to the home of her primary school teacher.

The first teacher Maria had is the model for her day-to-day conduct: this teacher did not hit pupils, she was pretty, she spoke softly in a kindly manner, and she had a very close relationship with her pupils. Maria herself relates how happy and keen she was to go to the teacher's house, how she used to take her flowers and have tea with her. It seems obvious that this pleasant memory has been transferred into her own habits today as a teacher.

Mozambique was a learning ground for the whole family. It was a period in their lives and a place that formed their social habits and behavior from a relative standpoint.

Maria acknowledges the influence of her husband in her conduct as a teacher open to cultural diversity, just as she undoubtedly influenced him in his work with the people. What they had in common was the ideal of links between cultures.

Such matters were always discussed between us. I was never a racist and neither was my husband. So we had this ideal of links between cultures. My husband always supported me and always helped me whenever I asked him, but he never interfered or imposed anything on me. And I did the same; he would ask my opinion and since I have always been on the side of the underprivileged, I would always suggest something along those lines, although he has always been a person of very firm principles.

Mozambique contributed a great deal to the development of a hermeneutic sense in the mind of this couple. They both learned to respect otherness and to communicate in the local way of thinking, seeking to understand how others think.

At the same time, Maria strengthened and internalized deep down the notion of cultural relativism, as well as learning to use the comparative method consciously in her everyday life.

The thing is that living in the bush was an extraordinary experience for me, such riches that could stand comparison with the city, with Portugal, with anything. It enabled me to understand the people better and their different life-styles. It made me understand that the policies the Portuguese government were implementing were not the best for the overseas provinces. I realized that people had preconceived, but mistaken, ideas; and that it's only by knowing the people, only by living among them in close contact that you can understand. So this experience gave me great internal richness. I think it made me a better person. I had exceptional black students, just as I had bad ones. It was a great experience for me. There are things in life that leave their mark on us and then influence our whole way of being afterwards.

Luísa

The teacher Luísa was born in 1945 in a small village in the district of Leiria. Her husband works in a bank. They have two children at university. Her parents had a small farm and from an early age she was accustomed to a life divided between domestic chores and working on the land. However, as the couple's only daughter, she was spared the heavier or so-called man's work. To some extent she increasingly saw the social division of work as a gender division in which women were in some ways at an advantage or at least saved by the harsh weather that makes outside work so wretched. She stayed indoors.

The church was nearby and she often played hide-and-seek, skipping games and blind man's bluff in its square. She took the sacraments in this church and from an early age started on a devout Christian life. The principles of solidarity and helping one's neighbor were derived from the message of the Gospel and internalized from the missionary ideals contained in the stories told by the catechists. She was talkative and enthusiastic and had leadership quality, a characteristic that her colleagues acknowledge she still has today.

On the other hand, her father's desire to "make something of his daughter" led Luísa to make a clear distinction between manual and intellectual work and to assign them different values, since the daughter was supposed to flee from the first by gaining access to the second, something her father could not do. Town life and escape from work on the land soon became fixed in the mind of the girl who would later become a teacher.

Nowadays, she goes back to 'her native land' as the 'school mistress' who knows how to speak well (as a child she was talkative) and who likes to visit her home village for spiritual nourishment to help her get through one more hectic week of the 'modern life' she had always dreamed of and towards which her father had encouraged her and told her how to achieve it: through study. "Study for your own good!" It was like saying "sow today so you can reap tomorrow". So Luísa quickly learned to separate the two worlds - that of her birthplace and that of intellectual work, the only worthwhile work in her opinion. Moreover, I feel that she never really knew thoroughly the skills that her childhood peers learned and which they continue to pass on to their children and grandchildren.

Despite having experience of a life-style that would have given her an emic view of communities further removed from school life, the type of community from which after all she also came, I frequently saw her talk and act in an extremely discriminatory and disparaging manner in

relation to the children: “*You know, Ricardo, this is a very poor environment, the parents are all working class. It’s very difficult to work with them*”.

Although Luísa is a reflective person and can easily find a theoretical explanation of everything or almost everything about the institution of the school, my field work and observation of her classes showed a contradiction between ideology and practice.

Her teaching methods are very different from what she says she does. In other words, it seems to me that Luísa in her day-to-day life as a teacher is also very close to the model of the primary school teacher that she herself had. It is as if we are confronted with two mentalities or even two personal identities: one designed to be seen as the external image, the one she wants us to believe corresponds to how she behaves, and which she sees as the ideal; and the other which corresponds to the practical and pedagogic ‘I’.

Luísa is thus an example of the *oblato* model described above. She appears to identify cultural ‘normality’ with rationality and the urban models of which she is now part. Everything else, albeit similar to her own childhood and adolescence, is seen as a handicap and cultural deprivation.

Conclusion

Of the two teachers I have briefly described, one is an intercultural *trânsfuga* and the other an *oblato*. As regards the latter, I would not say that she completely conceals her past. But she reconstructs it, often romanticizing it, and tends generally to erase it. I conclude from her descriptions that she considers it coarse and culturally deprived.

It should be noted, however, that the *oblato* is also in some sense a *trânsfuga*, but of a different kind. This type has also undergone a socio-cultural transfusion but during the acculturation resulting from the social processes they have experienced, they fully accept the mask of the new status and the new standard as implying the abandonment of a ‘rural hell’ and the conquest of an ‘urban paradise’.

An intercultural *trânsfuga* sees their experience of a rural childhood and adulthood and of the village schools where they end up teaching as a normal cultural fact, a consequence of cultural heterogeneity and of the class struggle. The basic difference lies in their ability to make pedagogic use of their past, which still represents the present for many, rather than seeing it as a handicap.

As António Nóvoa reminds us, the teacher is not just a technician. A teacher is also an individual person: “*The way each of us teaches is directly related to who we are as individuals while we are teaching*” (Nóvoa, 1992: 17).

Moreover, this way of being would seem to be determined to a large extent by what individuals make of the social constraints and conditions they have experienced throughout their lives, in particular their childhood and school life. It is associated with the way in which they transformed themselves in relation to their culture of origin. The process of socialization brings about cultural metamorphoses, leading some towards a model of monocultural attitudes and behavior, and others towards a more intercultural model.

The example of Maria, and of intercultural *trânsfugas* in general, should be taken into consideration in the design of teacher training courses that will produce ‘glocal’ teachers who are able to link their academic knowledge of school teaching with the cultural background of their pupils and prevent the teaching system from producing *oblatos*.

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