The Role of Education in Narrative Identity Construction of Young People: Focusing on Young Adoptees

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Introduction

Previous investigation stressing the critical role that school experiences detain on the construction of narrative identity in young adoptee (Vieira & Henriques, 2013a) is at the basis of the current research work. The present study aims at extending comprehension on this thematic through a focus on the relationship of young adoptees with the school context. This study lies on a comprehensive paradigm with the intent of adding to the discussion about the role of the school in the development of adolescents and young adults, in particular the adoptees.

The construction of narrative identity in adolescence

During the adolescence period the individuals are urged to construct an identity that allows them a productive relationship with the world (Erikson, 1968; McAdams, 2001; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). It is also the time when people gather sociocognitive conditions for the construction of coherent autobiographical narratives (Fivush & Buckner, 1998; Fivush & Haden, 2003; Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005; Fivush, 2008; McAdams, 1985; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). McAdams refers to the process of identity construction as the development of a sense of unity and purpose in face of the demands of the world and society. It is a process in which young people reorganize and reconstruct their life story in order to produce an autobiographical narrative. The construction of a narrative identity involves the making of consistent stories with the purpose of creating and communicating a sense of identity and meaning (Reese, Yan, Jack & Hayne, 2010). By adolescence, people in our modern society begin a process of reviewing the past, understanding the present and planning the future from the creation of narratives about themselves, which have a function to build a minimum of unity and purpose in their own lives and with the world. Life stories are co-constructed with people with whom they live, as well as in reference to the embedding sociocultural context. These situated stories, to use the term coined by McLean, Pasupathi and Pals (2007), not only shape, but also maintain the identity of its author. These narratives build an integrative configuration of the self in the adult world. They have the ability to integrate different diachronically life situations experienced over years in stories full of meaning. They also have the ability to organize the beliefs and attitudes towards life in terms of a process of change and transformation: previously I thought and acted in such a way, but now I think and act differently. Life stories have also a function of synchronous integration, organizing the different roles, forms of relationship and the

associated feelings and thoughts in a way that they can be seen and understood as a part of the same configuration of the self (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Narrative identity, adoption and well-being

The organization of a narrative identity through a coherent life story is related to the construction of a balanced personality, able to deal with negative events in a constructive way and therefore with a high level of coping skills, resilience and well-being (McAdams & McLean, 2013). In an investigation of the narrative construction of the self in young people with a history of neglect followed by adoption, Fitzhardinge (2008) found the organization of coherent narratives as a key element in building a resilient self. Youth adopted people tended to construct life narratives focused on the theme of attachment and interpersonal relationships. The presence of coherent narratives seems to indicate that they were managing to cope with the traumatic and disruptive elements in abandonment situation through a resignification of adverse experiences. The narratives of the resilient group had three common characteristics: the skill of reflection on oneself and others, the feeling that they could be active in relation to the circumstances and be able to influence their own future, and the acknowledgment of the importance of interpersonal relationships. Fitzhardinge concludes that the construction of life narratives is the foundation of the sense of self. What made the difference in building a resilient self was the way young people have provided renew meaning to the adverse events. The association between the construction of coherent life stories and coping is also shown in the study of Habermas e Bluk (2000). Studies such as Baerger and McAdams (1999) and Adler, Skalina and McAdams (2008) showed there is an association between well-being and production of coherent life stories, especially in stories where the protagonist has an active role in resolving the difficulties and problems. According to McAdams (2006), life stories that describe a life trajectory from a situation of social, emotional or relational instability to a situation where the difficulties are overcome (which he called 'redemptive stories') are associated with high levels of well-being. The life stories where narrators find redemptive meanings in suffering and adversity and that feature the theme of personal agency tend to enjoy higher levels of mental health, well-being and maturity (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

School and Identity

There is some consensus in literature around the critical role that the adolescents' school experiences (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006; Fereira, Farias & Silvares, 2009), the nature of the school environment (Gonçalves, 2012), and the relationships involving teachers and peers (Gonçalves, 2008) exert in the youngsters' self-image and identity construction. This relates in particular with the perspective of identity construction expressed by the interrelationship between the individual and the surrounding others through socio-cultural and linguistic practices (Lopes de Oliveira, 2006). In the adolescents' everyday lives a considerable amount of time is spent at school grounds. Consequently the school 'meddles' into their external environment in the sense that friendships built therein spread beyond the academic context. Thus, depending on the complexity of the relationships established at school, either individually and pedagogically, it can potentially represent either a source of satisfaction as stress for the youngsters (Ravens-Sieberer, Freeman, Kokonyei, Thomas & Erhart, 2009).

In the course of social interactions the adolescents devise an image of their self through the feedback on their behaviours and thoughts provided by peers. In turn, this feedback either confirms or prompts a change in their perception of self. Based on the nature of the feedback collected they may need to re-shape their identity in order to fit in and be approved in the particular socio-cultural context where they are situated (Sugimura & Shimizu, 2011). Gonçalves (2008) drawing over Honneth (2003), suggest that striving for recognition from peers is a key-element in the identity construction of adolescents. Throughout the process of identity construction people internalize standard schemata of social recognition through which they learn to identify themselves as members of a particular social group. However, the lack of social recognition or sense of not belonging to a particular social group can potentially inflict frustration, shame and humiliation to individuals with adverse effects on their identity construction. In this sense, establishing an interconnection, particularly with peers, is much about the search for belonging through the interplay with community members, by building references and values, replicating behaviour standards and reaching for relational power equilibrium (Sarmento, 2002).

The teachers themselves, along with the underlying pedagogical relationships with students evolving during academic interplay also play an important role in the construction of adolescent identities. In fact, both the relationships of adolescents with their peers as with their teachers are integral in the complexity of the school climate. The school climate comprises also of the school characteristics and the plethora of relationships occurring between teachers, students, administrators and parents. Because the nature of these interactions dictates the positioning of subjects in relation to the school itself, it has been argued that school climate holds critical influence on the identity construction of young students (Adeogun & Olisaemeka, 2011). For example, some theoretical and empirical postulates argue that students who take their teachers as role models do better in academic demands, show higher levels of self-esteem, are more resilient to adversity and thus, show higher confidence toward upcoming challenges (Rich & Schachter, 2012). Ultimately, it has been advocated that the school setting represents a key cultural societal institution to which students have to commit to during the process of co-construction of narrative identity in adolescence (Vasconcelos & Valsiner, 1995).

Nevertheless, regardless of the recognized key role that school experiences and the nature of the relational interactions during the adolescents' academic lifespan hold in their identity construction there is a glaring lack of studies examining this phenomenon. Indeed, the few existing studies were either shown to be somewhat inconclusive or revolved around issues concerned with gender, multiculturalism and integration of minority groups (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006). Despite the particular relevance of the life stories of adoptees, often impregnated by traumatic experiences and marked by adversity (Fitzhardinge, 2008), surprisingly the research in this area is particularly scarce, especially with regard to the narrative construction of identity in young adopted adults.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the development of life stories by young adopted adults through a narrative construction of identity with reference to the schooling context. The study's main interest concerns the role that school holds in the construction of narrative identity in young adults, focusing on adoptees.

Methodology
Subjects

The life stories were taken from the database of the Research Group Webs of Meaning from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto. The database was built from previous studies, already published (Vieira, 2012; Vieira & Henriques, 2013a).The participants were three young girls between 20 and 22 years old with a history of adoption in childhood.

Instruments and procedures

The first step taken in this research was to contact and invite a group of families to participate in the research project. During step two the project was presented to the families. The participants were invited to attend to an individual interview only after well clarified over the study's goals. It was applied the interview protocol of elicitation of Life Narrative. All interviews were recorded for later transcription.

Data analysis

After transcription, life stories have been divided into narrative sequences, according to the model of Adam (1985; 2008). The life narratives were submitted to a descriptive analysis of structure, process and content based in the code system of Gonçalves, Henriques and Cardoso (2006a); Gonçalves, Henriques, Alves and Rocha (2006b) and Gonçalves, Henriques, Soares and Monteiro (2006c) and Gonçalves, Henriques, Alves and Soares (2002). In each narrative sequence was identified and described the organizing theme of the sequence, the characters, the scenarios, the action itself, the evaluation, and finally the elements of narrative process. The next step was the identification of logical and chronological organization of narrative and of the episodes set throughout the history. After this first organization the life narrative was described in a case study.

Design

From the life stories were prepared three case studies, in a multiple case studies design (Yin, 2001). The names given to each case study are fictitious in order to protect the privacy of research subjects.

Findings and Conclusions

The case studies were organized around three different situations arising in the researching field. One adopted youth had a late adoption after the age of nine. The adoption took place at two and a half years old in the second case, while in the third case the adoption occurred at five months age, being the youngster diagnosed with mental health condition. Such situations seem to correspond to those faced by health professionals who work with adoption.

In the first situation, case Beatrice, the young later adoptee, has constructed very intense affective narratives. The memory of abandonment, of the abuse and of the period in which she lived in residential care was very vivid and traumatic. In the case of Beatrice, this experience is integrated. The affects, though intense, are arranged in a way that turns her life history into a rich learning experience. In a previous study (Vieira & Henriques, 2013a), we argued how this affects can appear in a raw manner. They disturb the narrative, drawing a circularity that repeatedly jumps between past and present, building a fragmentary history. Beatrice accepts abandonment as something that was inevitably imposed to her which caused an antagonism against the way of living of the biological family. The meaning given to life story was quite significant in the construction of narrative

identity. In Beatrice's narrative we found both a consciousness about the damaging past as a strong identification with the adoptive family. Another important element in the construction of narrative identity in this case was the fear to be perceived as different by peers. The voice of classmates and friends appear here as a kind of standardization that cannot be evaded. In the case of Beatrice this fear was not confirmed given that her school colleagues saw her has someone carrying a different life experience rather than someone different. Ultimately, it is important to note that in this case the theme of abandonment and adoption has been central in the life narrative. It emerged as a key issue with which the protagonist had to understand and make sense of. Adoption also appears as a landmark in the identity, a theme always full of conflicting emotions.

In the case where the girls were adopted between five months and two and a half years old the life narratives followed a trajectory given by culture: the school career. In the narratives of Freda and Amanda the elements of narrative identity crossed the school career, giving it a particular colouring corresponding to personal characteristics, so this course was marked by the unique way each one lives (narrates) their experiences. The personal issues were bounded to the narrative course, giving it a particular flavour. In the case of Amanda, the critical point was the conflict with authority figures, on face of that she reacts with defiance and irreverence. Irreverence by expansiveness appeared also in additional situations as a significant element of the narrative identity of Amanda.

In both cases the theme of adoption was very peripherally addressed. In Amanda's case the issue arises when she asks the interviewer if she should not have talked about adoption. On this account she refers to a specific moment when her physical education teacher questioned her about their parents' age over which she articulated quite easily about adoption. In both Freda and Amanda cases, adoption does not appear as a problem or as an important issue. Although in the case of Amanda, who was adopted at the age of two and a half, the abandonment may have left marks, this does not appear in her life narrative.

In the case of Freda the diagnosis of psychological condition appears as complexification of the narrative by creating new episodes were the protagonist had to overcome the difficulties and limits imposed by the diseases. In the case of Freda, several critical episodes affected her wellbeing, nervous anorexia, depression and mourning two close friends. Each of these situations has unleashed a new narrative course, which tended to resolve itself into a state of renewal and learning, in which new elements were added to her worldview. The challenges posed by diseases were defining elements in the construction of her narrative identity. Such diseases have created unique situations which cause reactions and attitudes that marked the action of the protagonist in her life narrative. On the other hand, some situations have arisen from the very own ethos of the character, which gave momentum to the challenging overcoming of her own psychological conflicts, self-imposed limitations or prejudice of others. It is remarkable that in this case the issue of adoption emerges as a curiosity to know where she came from, although Freda puts it on suspension for fear of rejection by her biological mother.

When we examine all the three cases at once for finding commonalities we can suggest that each of life narratives is marked by questions and personal characteristics that not only emerge as key elements of the narrative identity but move on through the lives, questioning them. In most cases, such issues appear as difficulties that put obstacles on personal development and that for this reason must be solved. Such problems are different in each case, according to differences in personal characteristics and life trajectories. This does not mean that we cannot find parallels or similarities. A very important common

characteristic of the cases is the choice of schooling as the leitmotiv of life narratives. In the life stories of adopted youths the theme 'school' appears in two different ways. Firstly the school appears as the main reference in the chronological construction of life stories. Secondly, the school appears as the locus of relationships among peers, which exert a massive influence on the construction of identity.

The choice of school as a reference in chronological construction of life stories is very meaningful. The school is a cultural context that provides not only a chronological dimension easy to be perceived through the evolution of degrees (school years), accompanying the trajectory of development of individuals from infancy through adolescence, as it operates as a space of socialization, in which people establish a social group. This group works as a very important reference in the construction of narrative identity of our research subjects. The school also appears as an important place of change of personal values and identity along the psychosocial development of the individual, which is in agreement with the findings of Gonçalves (2012). It is interesting that while the school context is the preferential reference in the construction of narrative identity, family emerges as a secondary reference. This seems to have been confirmed by studies involving a larger number of cases (Vieira & Henriques, 2013b). It is only in cases where family relationships are shown awfully traumatic that family appears as the main scenario whereby the life story unfolds. In the cases where family relationships seem to be harmonics, including the case Freda involving a divorce, the role of parents in the development of narrative identity is null. Therefore, a significant question arises, is this feature of the narrative construction of identity in adopted person or a general pattern? School choice as a reference to the chronological construction of life stories is important. The school arises here as the main scenario where the process of psychosocial development occurs and where the narrative identity is built. It is on school grounds that the major battles are fought and individuals face the most difficult challenges in the path of growth and achievement of maturity. That is what is told in the life stories of Amanda and Freda. The case of Beatrice stands out as an illuminating counterpoint. It is necessary a more pressing challenge to displace school as a reference in the narrative construction of identity to the background.

The second point is the role of school as the preferential locus of relationships among peers. The process of identity construction occurs not only in relation to schooling and teachers. They seem to have an important role in the construction of life stories, although secondary. The issues related to the relationship between peers emerges here as a key point corroborating the findings by Gonçalves (2008) and Sugimura and Shimizu (2011). So is the struggle for recognition and search for inclusion in a social group within school, a main challenge and centralizing element in the construction of narrative identity of these young people. It is in the relationship with peers that identity is negotiated and established. If one is not recognized by the group as a member and as individual there is no scope for the person to be at all. Not being acknowledged here means inferiority, humiliation and impossibility to be and act in the world. The fear of lack of recognition resembles fear the vacuum. Not be recognized is to be nothing. This fact points to the importance of interpersonal relationships to the identity construction and well-being within the school.

This study shows that as the logical-chronological construction of life narratives is related to the organization of identity and personality, so too is the experience of schooling. What our research subjects are saying is that is through school we grow up, build our

identity and become adults. The fact that school has such a significant role in the development of young people already entitles it as a potential space for health. The fact that young have produced coherent narratives centred on the school means that they were able to build a structured narrative identity and are managing to cope with the challenges and difficulties posed by life. This is a clear sign of mental wellbeing (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Such narratives patterns found in this study strongly suggest that school may play a critical role in organizing the identity and personality of people. According with young people, what happens in school has the potential either to impact positively in the construction of wellbeing, as in case things go wrong, be a source of anxiety. In this sense, our study points to the need of providing special attention to the management of peer relationship in school. Concluding, we can say with Sugimura and Shimizu (2011) that attention to adolescent identity development in day-today contexts can not only promote psychological wellbeing and adjustment among young people, but also prevent the social loss caused by delayed psychosocial development.

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