Identity and Biographical Construction and Life Project: Perspectives According to High School Students in Brazil

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Abstract

This paper is the result of a survey carried out in a public school in a city in the state of São Paulo/Brazil. We aimed at analyzing the Life Project module, a component of the curriculum of high schools that have the PEI- Full Time Education Program. We found the central focus of the analysis in the established principles, syllabuses and the students' feelings regarding such contents and the proposition of a life project. We defined as a central focus of the analysis the established principles, syllabuses and the students' feelings regarding such contents and the proposition of a life project. This longitudinal research has accompanied a group of ten students from their first to their third year of high school, at a school selected for this research. We used a discussion group as a research methodology and data analysis we based on Critical Discourse Analysis. As a conclusion, we considered that the excessive focus on issues such as socio-emotional skills, social initiative, self-confidence, responsibility, empathy, determination, assertiveness, stress tolerance, confidence and creative imagination, places too much responsibility on students and little reflection about the institutions responsible for this matter. Aspects such as public policies to support students choose a future profession (offer cultural and social experiences in order to help students expand their cultural and social capital; economic support to guarantee that students keep on studying) constitute a real contribution for students to be able to build their life project, alongside an identity and biographical construction.

Keywords: life project, identity, education and work, high school

1. Introduction

This paper is the result of a research carried out in a public school in a city in the state of São Paulo/Brazil. We propose to analyze the Life Project module, a component of the curriculum of high schools that have the PEI- Full Time Education Program. We established as the central focus analyzes of the principles, syllabuses and the students' feeling regarding such contents, and the proposal of a life project.

The research analysis categories are:

- The feeling of passing from childhood to adolescence, which characterizes students who are in their first year.
- Identity, biographical construction, the meaning of socio-emotional skills and training for work, the life project in this context, aspects worked on in the second year.
- The project built expectations and support networks for project implementation.

This longitudinal research has been accompanying a group of ten students from their first to their third year of high school of the selected school for the research. In this paper, we will discuss the first two categories. The discussion about the available support networks will be the subject of study and analysis during the year 2023, when students will already be finishing high school and supposedly already preparing their Life Project

The Full Time Education Program - PEI was established in 2012 through Complementary Law 1164 (SÃO PAULO, 2012a), of January 4th, amended by Complementary Law 1191 (SÃO PAULO, 2012b), of December 28th, 2012, as part of and continuity of the Education Program – Commitment of São Paulo, from 2011, both from the Secretary of Education of the state of São Paulo (SEDUC-SP). The Program had a significant expansion, in the number of schools and years of teaching that became part of the program and according to updated data, today there are 308 Ful Time Education Program-PEI schools, reaching 104 thousand students (SEDUC-SP, 2020).

This Program started in 2012, in 16 high schools, and from 2013 expanded to 22 Final Years Elementary Schools and 29 High Schools, and 2 Elementary and High Schools (SEDUC-SP, 2014a, p. 6-7).

In the aforementioned Complementary Law 1191/2012, article 2, item VI – the life project is present and defined as a document prepared by the student, which expresses goals and defines deadlines. This document addresses individual aptitudes, individual responsibility, social responsibility and institutional responsibility in relation to the Full Time State High School. The definition of the life project in this complementary law is very brief and does not clearly present which elements should be part of the life project, however, in later guidelines the concept of the established life project is very clear and will be analyzed later.

The meaning of the term "life project" is quite diverse, and can refer to issues of personal life, adult life, marriage, children, relationships, as well as guidance specifically aimed at professional insertion. Thus, the school is the space that should work with this theme as its task, leading the students to think over their future. The future, however, as pointed out by different authors (Lecardi, 2005, Castel, 1997; Sennett, 2002), is full of uncertainties, especially when we refer to the issue of training for work.

In an article that discusses the elaboration of the life project of young university students, Maia & Mancebo (2010, p. 382), based on the reflections of Velho (1999), state that individual projects are developed by students around the notion of time with stages chaining moment in which plans are elaborated. They point out that the life project, in Western society, is closely related to the notion of the individual and related to two aspects that are debatable: 1) the idea that individuals choose their life project, and 2) each one is the bearer of a set of peculiar potentialities, which constitutes his/her own brand, and of which his/her history (biography) is a more or less successful performance of these. They problematize these two aspects in the sense that this elaboration of the life project is related to sociocultural experiences and interactions that relativize the idea of a natural chain and a project that depends only on individuals and not on concrete life conditions.

In addition to these aspects, Démazier & Dubar (2006) relate the discussion of the life project with the issue of identity built over the lived experiences and the construction of time, articulating two dimensions that would be the biographical and the relational. The first dimension refers to the construction over time, by individuals, of social and professional identities based on the categories offered by successive institutions: family, school, labor market, company. The second dimension concerns the recognition, at a given moment and within a given space, of legitimizing the identities associated with the knowledge, skills and images of oneself proposed and expressed by individuals in the action systems.

2. Objectives

We aimed at analyzing and discussing students' views on the possibilities of building a life project during high school. Inasmuch, the following categories of analysis will be privileged, based on the main themes worked on in the Life Project module of the school participating in the research, which are the students' identity and biographical construction; the possibility of choices in this period of life and the support networks to help in this reflection.

3. Methodology

We used the Discussion Group as a research method with the ten students participating in the research. On average, the number of students in the classroom at Full Time Education Program-PEI schools is 25 students, but we chose to select 10 of them to make discussions easier. Life Project tutors (teachers at the school) selected the students who would participate.

The discussion group as a qualitative research methodology aimed to investigate the meanings that the themes addressed in the group would assume, based on dialogues, their own codes and the concrete reality experienced by the participating students.

In the literature regarding the difference between the discussion group and the focus group, Gutiérrez (2011) states that a fundamental aspect that differentiates the two methodologies is the fact that the discussion group is a more flexible, open way and less directive to streamline discussions in the group, which means giving the group a more exploratory and spontaneous purpose. Another author, Arboleda (2008), citing Cervantes (2002), highlights that the discussion group:

> It is [...] a process of interaction in which representations, opinions, attitudes, behaviors, symbolic systems, power relations and negotiations are put into play through which a certain consensus or polarizations are reached in the positions and conceptions of the participants […] it is a complex qualitative approach through which also complex interaction situations are analyzed (Arboleda, 2008, p.71).

The aspect to be highlight in this discussion is that the discussion group has as its central questions the production of meanings from the interactions that take place in the group more than the concern with a directive action by the researcher in the group. Arboleda (2008, p. 72), states that "The discussion group, therefore, advances in the search for meanings shared by its members, who recognize themselves in interpretative schemes in the same elaboration of meanings."

We conducted three discussion groups with the students participating in the research in October, November, and December 2021. Of the discussion groups that took place in 2021, 10 students participated who were in the first year of high school at the school participating in the research, a group that we continue following in 2022, with three more discussion groups in May, September and December and two more discussion groups in February and March 2023. The students who participated in the discussion groups remained the same in the three years the research was carried out.

We based data analysis on Critical Discourse Analysis, based on authors such as Van Dijk (2010) and Fairclough (2012). Critical Discourse Analysis is a discursive analytical investigation that seeks to understand, highlight and reveal how domination and inequality represent and reproduce in oral and written texts in each social and political context (VAN DIJK, 2010). Fairclough (2012) discusses the use of critical discourse analysis not as a method of analysis, but as a way of working with research data, referring to the idea of semiosis, which would be all forms of construction of meanings, such as images, body language and the language itself.

We consider that the analysis categories of the research data should have as a reference the concept of life project as a process that takes into account aspects such as the students' identity and biographical construction, different of the proposed Life Project module on the documents.

As Dubar (2000) states, in addition to choosing a profession or occupation, or even obtaining a diploma, the construction of a life project must be understood as a personal construction, an identity strategy that puts into play the image of the self, his/her capabilities and the fulfillment of his/her desires, always considering the lived reality. Still, in this sense, as previously mentioned, Santos (2002) considers that the life project of youngsters is linked to a series of variables and may suffer influences and symbolic impositions incorporated, from the family, from the social group to which he/she belongs to and the community ruling class ideology. These variables intersect at three different levels: historical, psychological and sociological.

According to the teachers of the Life Project module at one of the schools surveyed, the core contents covered are:

a) In the first grades of high school, teachers related the activities to self-knowledge, "Who I am and the choices I make". Together with the students, they work on "socio-emotional skills" as: Social Initiative, Self-Confidence, Responsibility, Empathy, Organization and Curiosity to Learn.

b) In the second grades, teachers relate activities to citizenship, "Who I want to be and the learning I need". They develop too activities of "socio-emotional skills" as: Empathy, Organization, Social Initiative, Frustration Tolerance, Focus, Determination, Respect and Artistic Interest.

c) In the third grades, teachers geared activities towards the world of work, "My path, achievements and new challenges", and work on "socio-emotional skills": Determination, Curiosity to Learn, Focus, Organization, Social Initiative, Assertiveness, Empathy, Stress Tolerance, Confidence and Creative Imagination.

At the end of high school, teachers assume that students will have gone through all the contents, providing more confidence and assertiveness in the choices and construction of their Life Projects.

We noticed that the word "socio-emotional competences" is present all the time in the objectives to be achieved in the three years of high school, a very controversial aspect because when discussing this ability to be developed in students uncritically, they fail to take into account the difficulties of these students' lives. The Airton Sena Foundation bases the conception of socio-emotional skills on a document, as follows:

Socio-emotional skills are individual abilities that manifest in ways of thinking, feeling and behaviors or attitudes to relate to oneself, others, set goals, make decisions and face adverse or new situations. They observe in our customary pattern of action and reaction to personal and social stimuli. Among other examples are persistence, assertiveness, empathy, self-confidence and curiosity to learn. Examples of skills considered hybrid are creativity and critical thinking as they involve socio-emotional and cognitive skills. (Airton Sena Institute, 2022)

Bearing in mind the importance given to "socio-emotional skills", we intend to analyze how much this phrase, even if subliminal, is present in the students' speeches based on the categories of data analysis listed below.

In this way, we listed following categories as data analysis categories for the group interview with the students:

1. The first year of high school: definitions of the passage from childhood to adolescence - the life project in this context.
2. The second year: identity construction, biographical; socio-emotional skills and training for work, the life project in this context.
3. The third year: life project, the project built and expectations.

What stands out is that there are different approaches with respect to the meaning given to the theme "life project", which can refer both to issues of personal life, adult life, marriage, children, relationships, as well as guidelines specifically aimed at insertion professional. Thus, the school is presented as the space that should include this theme as its task, promoting a space for reflection on the future of the students. The future, however, as pointed out by different authors (Lecardi 2014, .2005, Castel, 1997; Sennett, 2002), is full of uncertainties, especially when we refer to the issue of training for work.

4. Results and discussion

In the discussion of data, we present some highlights using identity constructions and the passage from childhood to adolescence as the central focus.

One of the questions we posed to the students was the feeling of adolescence for them. We asked the following questions: "What have you heard about adolescence, the good and the bad, in the family and in society in general?"

The most used words were:

- Extremes
- Responsibility
- Unrequited
- Spoiled

Among numerous responses, most young people highlight the feeling of incomprehension about the adolescence phase, which encompasses the idea of the absence of responsibility. Another thing was the parents' desire to reproduce in their children, their anxieties, dreams, and that for them was impossible.

For them, their life biography begins in adolescence, when they have greater knowledge about life, greater freedom, where their desires for the future also begin. As seen in the following statements:

> Speech 1: "*I have heard that in adolescence you have a lot of knowledge, because when you were little, your mother could not say these things, but when you grow up in adolescence, you already have this knowledge. That's why you have to be careful with the knowledge you are having, because you have to be responsible.*"

> Speech 2: "*For me, adolescence is a very normal thing, we always see in movies and series that have teenagers studying and looking for a job and I think that in adolescence, we get maturity to solve things both personally and professionally, we start to have a vision of what will happen to me from now on, I think it is a time for us to have a critical thinking about what is happening at the moment.*"

When we asked about how they saw themselves, several students demonstrated certainty and connection with the idea of responsibility and the search for an identity, as can be illustrated by the following statements:

> Speech 3: "*I now feel like a person who prioritizes things and I have something as a priority.*"

> Speech 4: "*I think I'm more focused and I think people see me responsible but not how I feel, sometimes I feel suffocated with too much to do and I can't handle it.*"

> Speech 5: "*I feel very focused regardless of what I'm doing, I always have a goal and people see me as a person to the extreme, I always have to have everything right, the right notebook, the right table and if it's not all right i freak out. If I can't do the things I want I cry, I'm very emotional. I think I dedicate myself a lot to other things, last year in tutoring my tutor said that I needed to work a lot on my anxiety I am very anxious, anything makes me despair.*"

However, in the present dialogue we perceived the presence of an identity and biographical construction based on the experience and the lived moment.

> Speech 6: "*I have no idea how people see me, but generally I feel very confident about my decisions, I try to be optimistic, always see something positive where there is none so sometimes they can judge me I try to give emotional support to my friends and sometimes it ends up being boring I get very confused in these relationships I have I don't know if I'm living my life right but I try to enjoy and try to do things by myself without influence from people because I was maria-vai-com-as -others and hated it.*"

> Speech 7: "*I had a friend of mine and he had some political opinions, certain ways of talking he was a person who said whatever he wanted and I looked at him and thought "Wow, what a f*** kid" he wanted to be like him but now for me it's ridiculous and people called me mini Alan which was his name, at first I liked it but then I found it boring.*"

> Speech 8: "*You felt the need to create your own identity.*"

> Speech 9: "*Yes, then I thought enough of that I want people to see me as João so I try to be me because that bothered me a lot.*"

We conclude that the construction of the student's identity and his biography go together, that is, there is a relationship between both in this construction process, which has external elements, but is also strongly influenced by personal idealization. As stated by Dubar (2000), the construction of a life project must be understood as a personal construction, an identity strategy that puts into play the image of the self, its capabilities and the fulfillment of its desires, always considering the lived reality.

Regarding training for work, expectations occur together with identity creation, where one interconnects with the other in choices and solutions. Thinking about the construction of a life project is a process that refers to the identity under construction and the possibilities created by social institutions, such as family, school, job market, company.

The family proved to be a key element in the reflection on the life project, both the family they are part of and the family they would like to build. We carried out some of the group interviews after the pandemic, which made stay at home, and probably started to value family life more. The term "family" even appears in references to work, as we can see in the following statements, generated from the choice of images by students to represent their life project:

> Speech 10: "*I really want to have the opportunity to have a lot of children, people often ask me if my life project is to work on something, and be good at what I do, but no, I just want to have children myself, pass a legacy ahead of me just like my father and grandfather did for me.*"

> Speech 11: "*Look, I chose these two here, which is a couple getting married and a family, because, I think people have a focus like that, who think that a life project is just work and I already thought too much about work and college, and my dream has always been to get married and have a family. Now I think it's like this, I think it will be something that will happen soon, not before college, but I think that life project is not just a profession, having a job, like, mine is having a family and getting married young , and that's it.*"

> Speech 12: "*I learned from my father, I learned a lot from my mother, from my grandfather and I also learned that sometimes we do not necessarily need words, only things that happen in our lives can teach us. For me, it was the death of my grandfather, which brought me incredible questions, and my maturity evolved a lot.*"

Some students found the issue of work sometimes fanciful, as for example one of the students who dreamed of being a football player, like "Neymar", but that the concrete life condition made him give up that dream. Many of the students referred to the intention of continuing their studies by attending a university, which is not always confirmed because the concrete reality of life prevents the realization of such projects, but reflection on the possibilities helps in the search to materialize the project.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can highlight the importance of the school in awakening students to a reflection for the future, but making them understand that it is not just an individual process, but also a collective one. Collective in the sense that the responsibility for the elaboration of a life project comes along with the biographical construction of that student. This biographical construction goes hand in hand with the construction of identities and public policies, the family and society are fundamental elements for the "success" of this endeavor.

Favacho (2011) in her master's thesis, points out that the "theoretical" basis present in the Full Time Education Program- PEI proposal related for the elaboration of the life project, for the most part, are self-help books. We observed this in the formulation of the document base for the Full Time Education Program-PEI, about training of teachers and principals. The excerpt from one of the Program documents makes this orientation clear:

What makes some people capable of achieving such extraordinary and peculiar success as to be called outstanding? We tend to believe that exceptional trajectories such as those of the geniuses who revolutionized the world of business, the arts, sciences and sports are due solely to talent. However, in this book you will see that the universe of brilliant personalities hides a much more fascinating and complex logic than it appears. Based on the stories of celebrities such as Bill Gates, the Beatles and Mozart, Malcom Gladwell shows that nobody does it alone. To reach the level of excellence in any activity, no less than 10,000 hours of practice are needed, the equivalent of three hours a day (or 20 hours a week) of training for 10 years (SEDUC-SP, 2014c, p. 23. APUD Favacho, 2011, p. 111).

Reiterating the individual's responsibility in the face of success or failure in life, as we will see shortly, the paths suggested are goals proposed by coaching, self-help bestsellers and entrepreneurship.

Excessive focus on issues such as socio-emotional skills, social initiative, self-confidence, responsibility, empathy, determination, assertiveness, stress tolerance, confidence and creative imagination places too much responsibility on students and promotes little reflection on institutional responsibility.

Aspects such as public policies to support young people, in the sense of enabling a real choice in defining a future profession is very important. This policies can contribute to expand cultural and social experiences that allow young people to purchase what Bourdieu (2007) calls cultural and social capital; economic support so that these students can continue studying, are examples

that could constitute a real contribution for students to be able to build their life project, alongside an identity and biographical construction.

Acknowledgment

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