



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

Joyce Mary Adam

Universidade Estadual Paulista-UNESP, Brazil

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 analyzed the Life Project module, a component of the high school curriculum in the Full Time Education Program (PEI). We concentrated on the analysis of the established principles, syllabuses, and students' feelings regarding such content and the life project as a whole. This longitudinal research followed a group of ten students from their first to third years of high school at one school. Data were collected using discussion groups and analyzed based on critical discourse analysis. We found 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 placed too much responsibility on students and there was little reflection about the institutions responsible. Aspects such as public policies to support students in choosing a future profession by, for example, offering cultural and social experiences to help students expand their cultural and social capital or providing economic support to guarantee that students keep on studying, would constitute a real contribution for students to be able to build their life project, alongside identity and biographical construction.

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

1. Introduction

This paper is the result of research carried out in a public school in a city in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. We analyzed the Life Project module, a component of the curriculum in high schools that have the Full Time Education Program (PEI), and concentrated on assessing the principles, syllabuses, and the students' feeling regarding such content, as well as the proposal of a life project as a whole. The analytical categories used in this research were:

- The feeling of passing from childhood to adolescence that characterizes students in their first year of high school,
- Identity, biographical construction, the meaning of socio-emotional skills, and training for work, as well as the life project in this particular context, which formed the key elements in the second year of high school, and
- The expectations developed by the project and the support networks present during project implementation.

This longitudinal research followed a group of ten students from their first to third years of high school at the selected school for this research. In this paper, we discuss the first two analytical categories mentioned above. Discussion of the available support networks will be the subject of a later study after students have finished high school and, supposedly, have already begun preparing their Life Project.

The PEI was established in 2012 through Complementary Law 1,164 (São Paulo, 2012), of January 4, amended by Complementary Law 1191 (São Paulo, 2012), of December 28, 2012, as part of and an extension of the Education Program Commitment of São Paulo, from 2011, both from the Secretary of Education of the state of São Paulo. The program started in 2012 in 16 high schools, and from 2013 expanded to 22 final year elementary schools, 29 high schools, and 2 combined elementary and high schools (SEDUC-SP, 2014, pp. 6–7). The program was significantly expanded, in terms of both the number of schools and the years of teaching that were part of the program. According to updated data, there are now 308 PEI schools, serving 104,000 students (SEDUC-SP, 2020).

Article 2, item VI of Complementary Law 1191/2012 includes the life project, which is defined as a document that the student prepares to express their life goals, while also including deadlines for meeting those goals. The document addresses individual aptitudes, as well as individual, social, and institutional responsibility in relation to the PEI high school. The definition of the life project in this complementary law is very brief, however, and does not clearly present what elements should be part of the project. In later guidelines, the concept of the established life project is very clear, as will be analyzed later. In general, the meaning of the term “life project” is quite diverse, and it can refer to issues related to the student's personal life, adult life, marriage, children, relationships, and guidance specifically aimed at professional insertion. The school is thus the space that should engage with this theme as its task and encourage students to think about their future. The future, however, is full of uncertainties, as has been pointed out (Castel, 1997, Leccardi, 2005, Sennett, 2002), especially when we consider the issue of training for work.

Following the reflections of Velho (1999), in their elaboration of the life project of young university students Maia and Mancebo (2010, p. 382) state that individual projects are developed around the notion of time, with stages linked to the 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, as well as to two aspects that are debatable: (a) the idea that individuals choose their life project, and (b) that each individual is the bearer of a set of peculiar potentialities that constitutes his/her own “brand” and that his or her history (biography) is a

more or less successful performance of these potentialities. They problematize these two aspects when they observe that this elaboration of the life project is related to sociocultural experiences and interactions that relativize the idea of a natural chain and results in a project that depends only on individuals and not on concrete life conditions.

Demazière and Dubar (2006) also relate the discussion of the life project with the issue of identity built throughout lived experiences and the construction of time, they articulate two dimensions: the biographical and the relational. The biographical dimension refers to the ways individuals construct, over time, social and professional identities based on the categories offered by successive institutions: family, school, labor market, and companies. The relational dimension concerns the recognition, at a given moment and within a given space, of the legitimization of the identities associated with the knowledge, skills, and images of oneself proposed and expressed by individuals within action systems.

2. Objectives

In this paper, we analyze and discuss students' views on the possibilities of building a life project during high school. The following categories of analysis have been privileged, based on the main themes worked on in the Life Project module at the school where this research was conducted: students' identity and biographical construction, the possibility of choices during this period of life, and the networks of support available to help in this reflection.

3. Methodology

We used the discussion group method for data collection with the ten students participating in this study. The average number of students per class at PEI schools is 25, but we chose to select 10 of them to make discussions easier. Life Project tutors (teachers at the school) selected the student participants. Discussion groups are a qualitative research methodology that aim to investigate the meanings assumed by the themes addressed in the group, based on dialogues, their own codes, and the concrete reality experienced by the participating students. Gutiérrez (2011), in distinguishing between discussion and focus groups, states that a fundamental difference between the two methodologies is the fact that the discussion group is a more flexible, open approach that is less subject to streamlining of discussions in the group, which means that the group has a more exploratory and spontaneous purpose. Arboleda (2008), citing Cervantes (2002), highlights that the discussion group 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. (p. 71)

The key aspect here is that the discussion group has, as its central question, the production of meanings from the interactions that take place in the group, rather than a concern with a directive action by the researcher. As Arboleda (2008) notes, "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" (p. 72).

We conducted three discussion groups with the participating students in October, November, and December 2021. Ten students participated in the first year of high school participated in these discussion groups, and we continued to follow this group, with three more discussion

groups in May, September, and December 2022, and two more discussion groups in February and March 2023. The students who participated remained the same over all three years in which the research was conducted.

We then conducted critical discourse analysis, following the guidelines of authors such as Van Dijk (2010) and Fairclough (2012). Critical discourse analysis is a discursive analytical approach that seeks to understand, highlight, and reveal how domination and inequality are represented and reproduced in oral and written texts in a given social and political context (Van Dijk, 2010). In particular, Fairclough (2012) noted the use of critical discourse analysis not as a method of analysis, but as a way of working with research data, with reference to the idea of semiosis, which would include all forms of construction of meanings, such as images, body language, and language itself.

We determined that the analytical categories for the research data should use as a reference the concept of the life project as a process that takes into account aspects such as the students' identity and biographical construction, which is different from the proposed Life Project module that appears in 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, while always considering the lived reality. Still, as previously mentioned, Santos (2002) has suggested that students' life project is linked to multiple variables and may suffer influences and incorporate symbolic impositions from the family, from the social group to which the student belongs, and from the ideology of the ruling class in the community. These variables intersect at three different levels: historical, psychological, and sociological.

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

- Activities related to self-knowledge, such as “Who I am and the choices I make”: Together with the students, teachers work on socio-emotional skills such as: social initiative, self-confidence, responsibility, empathy, organization, and curiosity to learn. This component takes place in the first years of high school.
- In later years, teachers relate these activities to citizenship: “Who I want to be and the learning I need.” Activities related to socio-emotional skills are developed further, with a focus on empathy, organization, social initiative, frustration tolerance, focus, determination, respect, and artistic interest.
- In the third year, activities are geared towards the world of work, such as “My path, achievements and new challenges,” as well as on the socio-emotional skills of determination, curiosity to learn, focus, organization, social initiative, assertiveness, empathy, stress tolerance, confidence, and creative imagination.

By the end of high school, teachers assume that students have gone through all the content of the Life Project module, which would provide the students with more confidence and assertiveness in the choices and construction of their own Life Projects.

We noticed that the phrase “socio-emotional skills” as present throughout the objectives for the three years of high school, and this appeared to be a very controversial aspect. When discussing the development of this ability in students uncritically, they failed to take into account the difficulties of these students' lives. According to the Ayrton Senna Foundation (2022),

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.

Bearing in mind the importance given to socio-emotional skills, we analyzed how far this phrase, even if subliminally, remained present in the students' speeches based on the categories we developed for the data analysis of the group discussions with the students:

- The first year of high school: the life project in the context of the definitions of the passage from childhood to adolescence,
- The second year: the life project in the context of constructing an identity and biography, as well as socio-emotional skills and training for work, and
- The third year: life project, the project built, and expectations.

Notably, there were different approaches to the meaning given to the theme "life project," which can refer to issues related to the individual's personal life, adult life, marriage, children, and relationships, as well as to guidelines specifically aimed at professional insertion. The school was thus presented as a space that should include this in its task—that is, promoting a space for reflection on the future of the students.

4. Results and discussion

In the discussion of data, we present some of the 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 about what adolescence felt like to them. We asked the following questions: "What have you heard about adolescence, the good and the bad, in your family and in society in general?" The most used words were extremes, responsibility, unrequited, and spoiled.

Among the numerous responses, most of the young people emphasized a feeling of incomprehension about adolescence as a phase, which encompasses the idea of the absence of responsibility. They also mentioned their parents' desire to reproduce their own anxieties, dreams, and what had been impossible for them in their children. For the students, their life biography begins in adolescence, when they have greater knowledge about life, as well as greater freedom. Their desires for the future also begin during this life phrase, which can be 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 enter 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 it 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 think critically 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 as responsible, but that is 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 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 followed the crowd and hated it.

Speech 7: I had a friend, 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.” I 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.

It thus appears that the construction of the students' identity and goes together with their biography—that is, there is a relationship between the two in this construction process. There are external elements, but the process is also strongly influenced by personal idealization. As Dubar (2000) noted, 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, while always considering the lived reality.

There are expectations regarding training for work together with identity creation: one interconnects with the other in terms of choices and solutions. 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 the family, school, job market, and companies. The family proved to be a key element in the students' 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 required the students to stay at home and probably led them to start valuing family life more. The term “family” even appears in references to work, as we can see in the following statements, generated from the images chosen 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 after me, just like my father and grandfather did for me.

Speech11: Look, I chose these two here, which is a couple getting married and a family, because I think some people have a focus like that and think that a life project is just work. I have 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 a 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 led me to incredible questions, and my maturity evolved a lot.

Some students found the issue of work sometimes fanciful. For example, one of the students dreamed of being a football player, like Neymar, but his concrete life conditions made him give up that dream. Many of the students referred to the intention of continuing their studies by attending a university, which was not always something that was possible, given that the concrete reality of life could prevent the realization of such projects. The reflection on the possibilities helps, however, in the search to materialize the life project.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can highlight the importance of the school in awakening students to a reflection on the future, while also helping them to understand that it is not just an individual process, but also a collective one. It is collective in the sense that the responsibility for the elaboration of a life project is linked with the student's biographical construction, which in turn 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. In her master's thesis, Favacho (2011) points out that the “theoretical” basis present in the PEI proposal for the elaboration of the life project is, for the most part, drawn from self-help books. We observed this in the formulation of the document base for the PEI for the 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, cited in Favacho, 2011, p. 111)

Reiterating the individual's responsibility in the face of success or failure in life, 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 particularly important. Such policies could contribute to expanding access to experiences that would allow young people to

acquire what Bourdieu (2007) calls cultural and social capital. Economic support so that these students could continue studying would be one example of what could constitute a real contribution for students to be able to build their life project, alongside identity and biographical construction.

Acknowledgements

This research has been supported by the Foundation for Research Support of the State of São Paulo (FAPESP) and the National Research Council (CNPq).

The article has been proofread by PRS.

References

- Airton Senna Foundation (2022) O que são Competências Emocionais dos Estudantes. Available from: <https://institutoayrtonsenna.org.br/o-que-defendemos/competencias-socioemocionais-estudantes/>
- Arboleda, Luz M. (2008). El grupo de discusión como aproximación metodológica en investigaciones cualitativas. *Revista Facultad Nacional de Salud Pública*, 26(1), 69–77.
- Bourdieu, P. (2007). O Capital Social- notas provisórias. In M.A. Nogueira & A. Catani (Eds.), *Escritos de Educação*. 9ª.ed. Vozes. Petrópolis, R.J., 39-64.
- Castel, R. (1997). A dinâmica dos processos de marginalização: da vulnerabilidade a “desfiliação”. *CADERNO CRH*, 26/27, 19–40. <https://portalseer.ufba.br/index.php/crh/article/view/18664/12038>
- Demazière, D. & Dubar, C. (2006). *Trajetórias profissionais e formas identitárias: uma teorização*. In N. A. Guimarães & H. Hirata (Eds.), *Desemprego: trajetórias, identidades, mobilizações* (pp. 165–187). São Paulo: SENAC.
- Dubar, C. (2000). *La crise des identités: L'interprétation d'une mutation*. Paris: PUF.
- Fairclough, N. (2012). Análise crítica do discurso como método de pesquisa social científica. *Revista Linha d'água*, 25(2), 307–329.
- Favacho, A. V. (2020). *A empresa na escola: o projeto de vida no Programa de Ensino Integral do Estado de São Paulo e a formação do estudante do ensino médio*. Master's thesis, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Faculdade de Educação, Campinas, SP. Available from: <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12733/1640774>
- Gutiérrez, J. (2011). Grupo de discusión: ¿Prolongación, variación o ruptura con el focus group? *Cinta Moebio*, 41, 105–122.
- Leccardi, C. (2005). Por um novo significado do futuro mudança social, jovens e tempo. *Tempo Social, revista de sociologia da USP*, 17(2), 35–57.
- Maia, A. A. R. M. & Mancebo, D. (2020). Juventude, trabalho e projetos de vida: ninguém pode ficar parado. *Psicologia, Ciência e Profissão*, 30(2), 376–389.
- São Paulo (2012). Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo. *Lei Complementar nº 1.164, de 04 de janeiro de 2012*. SP São Paulo.
- São Paulo (2014). Secretaria de Educação do Estado de São Paulo. Diretrizes do Programa Ensino Integral: escola de Tempo Integral. São Paulo, SP, 2014a. Available from: <https://www.educacao.sp.gov.br/a2sitebox/arquivos/documentos/342.pdf>

São Paulo (2020). Secretaria de Educação do Estado de São Paulo. Programa Escola em Tempo Integral. São Paulo, SP, 2020. Available from: <https://www.educacao.sp.gov.br/escola-tempo-integral>

Sennett, R. (2002). *O declínio do homem público: as tiranias da intimidade* (8th ed.). São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 2002.

Van Dijk, T. A. V. (2010). *Discurso e poder*. Editora Contexto.