Living in between: Schooling processes of working-class students in Northern Portugal

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Abstract

This article discusses schooling processes among students attending public school in contexts defined as vulnerable. The work also takes into account the implications of a narrative-based method, especially in terms of the relationships that can be built between researcher and research participants. On the understanding that the narrative approach has the potential to consolidate itself as a source of information on a particular social group, secondary school students, we raise a debate about the representations young people make of school. In addition, we analyze future frameworks in light of schooling processes developed in disadvantaged areas. With regard to method, we weave a dialogue on the requirements and ethical implications concerning the relationship between researcher and participants. This text is based on biographical meetings held with two students aged 17, a boy and a girl, enrolled in a Portuguese secondary school. The results show that the students perceive school as a key place for learning, a site where socialization occurs and, especially, a refuge from problems. Despite supporting future projections, however, this same school cannot work as a social equity device.

Keywords: periphery; public school; secondary school; youth; equity; narratives

Resum. *Vivint entremig: El procés d'escolarització dels joves de classe obrera al nord de Portugal*

Aquest article inclou una discussió sobre els processos d'escolarització de nois i noies que assisteixen a l'escola pública en contextos definits com a vulnerables. La recerca també té en compte les implicacions metodològiques basades en un enfocament narratiu, especialment en les relacions que es poden establir entre els participants de la investigació i l'investigador. Considerem que l'enfocament narratiu constitueix una font d'informació rellevant per analitzar grups socials específics, com és el cas dels estudiants de l'escola secundària. En aquest text, hi proposem una reflexió al voltant de les representacions que els alumnes fan de l'escola i plantegem un debat sobre els futurs possibles d'escolarització dels joves en zones desfavorides. Respecte a la metodologia, teixim un diàleg sobre els requisits i les implicacions ètiques relatives a les relacions establertes en el camp de la recerca narrativa. Aquesta investigació es basa en trobades biogràfiques amb dos estudiants de 17 anys, un noi i una noia matriculats en un institut portuguès. Els resultats mostren que tots dos perceben l'escola com un lloc clau per a l'aprenentatge i la socialització, i,

sobretot, com un refugi davant dels problemes quotidians. Com a contrapunt, l'escola, més enllà de donar-los suport en el disseny d'un futur personal, no funciona com un dispositiu d'equitat social.

Paraules clau: perifèria; escola pública; instituts d'educació secundària; joves; equitat; investigació narrativa

Resumen. *Viviendo entremedias: Los procesos de escolarización de jóvenes de clase obrera en el norte de Portugal*

En este artículo presentamos una investigación sobre los procesos de escolarización de chicos y chicas que asisten a la escuela pública en contextos definidos como vulnerables. El trabajo también plantea las implicaciones de la metodología basada en el enfoque narrativo y, más concretamente, en la relación que se construye entre los participantes en la investigación y el investigador. Entendemos que el enfoque narrativo constituye una fuente de información relevante para analizar a grupos sociales específicos, como es el caso de los estudiantes de un centro de secundaria. En este texto proponemos reflexionar acerca de las representaciones que los alumnos hacen de la escuela y planteamos realizar un debate acerca de los futuros procesos de escolarización de jóvenes situados en zonas desfavorecidas. Con respecto a la metodología, tejemos un diálogo sobre los requisitos y las implicaciones éticas en el campo de las relaciones en la investigación narrativa. El análisis se basa en encuentros biográficos con dos estudiantes de 17 años, un chico y una chica de un instituto portugués. Los resultados muestran que ambos perciben el centro docente como un lugar clave para el aprendizaje y la socialización, y, sobre todo, como un refugio para los problemas cotidianos. Sin embargo, dicho centro, más allá de ayudarles a diseñar un futuro personal, no funciona como un dispositivo de equidad social.

Palabras clave: periferia; escuela pública; institutos de educación secundaria; jóvenes; equidad; investigación narrativa

Summary

1. Introduction

This article promotes a reflection on the educational trajectories of young people residing in areas identified as sensitive and marked by deprivation, especially concerning aspects related to economic and social status. The two cities involved in the study were chosen due to their low social development indexes documented both in official state reports and in academic research (Gonçalves et al., 2012; SDE, 2014). In each of the areas, a secondary school was selected considering tendencies of social vulnerability. Our discussion also

includes questions of a methodological character aimed at debating the need for constant reflection on the empirical work, since the development of biographical narratives demands the capacity of working jointly with the subjects and not upon them (Pereira et al., 2016).

Secondary public school emerges as a concrete setting for our investigation. It resembles a delicate scenario where several missions cross, from the sociopolitical integration of distinct generations to the management of school and social justice issues (Matos, 2013a). It should also be emphasized that the school space constitutes a place where, throughout the years, thousands of students have searched for life's meaning (Abrantes, 2003). The meanings that students attribute to their experiences within schooling will vary according to the social, personal, and institutional aspects that interfere directly in the processes of education (Charlot, 2000, 2009; Dayrell, 2007; Silva, 2010).

As Young (2007) concluded, we are convinced that the school has specific functions, so that it enables, or can enable, young people to acquire knowledge that for most of them might otherwise not be acquired at home or in the community. According to the author, schools can increase the possibilities that young people have of becoming active critical citizens by offering them *powerful knowledge*, something that provides reliable explanations or new forms of thinking about the world. In this sense, the author corroborates his argument about the importance of school, stating that the wish for emancipatory practices associated with the expansion of schooling is directly linked to the acquisition of this *powerful knowledge*, which is unavailable in other contexts. We understand, however, that this acquisition in itself is unable to respond to demands for social justice.

Regarding the school's role as a promoter of social equity, we understand that substituting a democratic model centered on citizenship for another model centered on consumption (Matos, 2013a) has made such a process more difficult. Along with Derouet (2010), we read the phenomenon of self-government as a means of justifying the unfolding of each life story as an individual responsibility, in which the state's responsibilities are erased.

Still, it is under the conception that the school is an elementary educational promoting institution that we design our investigation. We are interested in the schooling of subjects in vulnerable spaces, as we try to comprehend how these subjects take ownership of the school while writing their own personal histories. In other words, we ask if school keeps making sense for young people living in less developed contexts and, if so, how it supports their personal projects.

It is also important to observe that our initial identification of the contexts as being of a vulnerable nature does not lead us to track narratives based solely on this assumption. We deal with the students' life stories with an open mind as to what extent these young students themselves refer to the influence of vulnerabilities in their educational trajectories. Periphery, in our view, emerges from a set of permeable micro and macro characteristics. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that our research involves two distinct coun-

tries, Brazil and Portugal. From a macro perspective, then, we are dealing with a traditional notion of periphery, the one connected with economic development (Domingues, 1994; Heikkinen, 2001).

We contemplate Portugal under the lens of semi-periphery, understanding that the country integrates characteristics of central areas and others typical of peripheral contexts (Stoer & Araújo, 2000). In the case of Brazil, it is necessary to recognize its emergence in the economic scene, without losing sight of the fact that the country's increased financial prosperity did not coincide with the maintenance of an egalitarian society. Then, periphery results as a character in perspective, especially in the social field (Iosif, 2007). From the micro point of view, we interpret the notion of periphery as a form of suburb, especially one with marginalized sports, and social and cultural apparel, in the composition of what is recognized as a sensitive zone (Van Zanten, 2001), that is, a neighborhood lacking basic social infrastructure. One of the challenges of this research, however, is to allow the participants themselves to place the meanings of this sensibility, once they consider themselves to be part of a vulnerable neighborhood. In other words, the strength and impact of periphery in the development of a schooling trajectory is, to some extent, dependent on how students recognize their contexts as such.

In order to respond to the problematic proposal, we establish our work in a qualitative paradigm guided by the principles of narrative studies (Clandinin, 2006). It is a choice consistent with our objectives, as it enables us to know in depth the history of the subjects who live in regions considered deprived and comprehend their sense of public education in their trajectories. In our reading, vulnerable neighborhoods (structure) are not full barriers to students' educational development (agency). Rather, we work with the idea of reciprocal conditioning, in which agents' attitudes are seen as connected to a contextual scope that helps in understanding their history (Ferrarotti, 2007). Structures, though, do not limit agency solely.

For this paper, we report two narratives of young Portuguese students, a boy and a girl, both enrolled in secondary schools focused on the arts. This choice is based on the connections that their histories show, allowing for a discussion on the meanings of school and its relationship with the possibilities of the future.

2. On narratives: Strengthening relationships

The use of the narrative approach in studies on education values the recognition and acceptance that the world is plural; a quality in itself defining of one's existence (Bauman, 1999). According to Bolívar (2014), the narrative biographical approach emphasizes the crises of Positivism and points to the hermeneutical turn in the social sciences, so constituting a specific perspective of investigation containing its own credibility and demanding a different way of doing science in the conventional qualitative paradigm. For the author, the biographic narrative is strengthened from new dimensions of the discourse

and the text within the narrative turn framework. Thus, there is relevance to the discursivity of an individual, and to the ways humans live and give meaning to the world through the expression of language.

The choice of a narrative methodology implies the desire to deepen knowledge and understanding of a specific subject, drawn from detailed personal information about how these people came to realize or experience situations that took place in their lives (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). In this same sense, Josselson (2007) states that the essence of the narrative approach is linked to the researcher's interest in obtaining data through the construction of a deeply human, genuine, empathic, and respectful relationship with the research participants.

While discussing life histories, Goodson and Sikes (2001) mention that there are several ways of conducting an investigation according to the principles of this methodology, which is intrinsically connected with the narrative form. For them, each project implies its own characteristics and demands, and the researcher should sharply reflect about the way to articulate the proposed work and generally become able to recognize which aspects of their personal style should be explored.

Nevertheless, what aspects should be emphasized in the work with narrative methodologies? Josselson (2007) reminds us that the researcher should be sensitive to subjects that could be stressful for the respondents. Moreover, it is crucial that the researcher has a minimum of a shared social and cultural background of the universe within which participants live. Researchers need to connect and maintain the posture of a good listener; never judging, but paying attention to what is said, respecting the emotional space of the participant, and showing empathy without expressing an opinion. In addition, Goodson and Sikes (2001) emphasize that a researcher of narrative methodologies should be perspicacious and ready to read between the lines, besides being a good listener. For them, it is crucial to demonstrate an interest in the narrated content and to be able to ask without threatening or embarrassing. To a certain extent, they say the researcher should be the kind of person one wants to talk to.

This academic posture, resulting from an open attitude of a strong interrelational character, still demands that the researcher is perceived in their central role, that is, their role in an inquiry work is to gather information to deepen the knowledge of a specific area. Posing themselves as a good listener could also imply, as Josselson (2007) mentions, the participant's desire to establish a relationship that goes beyond the academic work. According to the author, any interview, a basic instrument in the work of the narrative approach, is an intervention. Yet, what should be noted is that unlike a therapeutic hearing, this "academic hearing" puts the respondent in a specialist's position, and thus the promoter of meaning in the work being investigated. Ethically, this recognition implies not leaving participants feeling abandoned or used throughout the investigations, something that can be avoided by constantly reminding them of the reason for the meetings between researcher and participant.

Conscious of the above-mentioned implications and demands, we assume that the narrative approach has the potential to become a source of information on a specific social group. In our investigation, it is about secondary school students in two different countries living in less developed contexts. For that reason, the work considers the views of young people, which constitute a particular world perspective with aspects in common, but also with idiosyncrasies, so that it can provide us even more information on the institutional, socio-historical contexts where schooling, family relationships, and the spaces occupied throughout life cross (Fonseca, 2001).

As Lyons (2010) points out, the narrative approach translates into a scientific endeavor, a fundamental activity of the mind, becoming an intentional reflective activity where the narrative is simultaneously a history, a way of knowledge, and a research tool for investigation. Therefore, we should be prepared to face the management of relationships with the participants at implicit and explicit contractual levels (Josselson, 2007). It is necessary to remain alert to the dignity of those involved as narrated people, keeping in mind that a narrative should be a concrete process of collaboration in which public hierarchies add no value.

These aspects are of the utmost importance, since narrating is not only reporting a sequence of episodes, but an exercise that invites researchers and participants to reflect and to represent the way humans answer to the cultural, political, and historical conditions surrounding us (Goodson, 2013). As Clandinin et al. (2007) debate in their article on narrative inquiry, there are three common places that help in guiding narratives: temporality, sociality, and place. When explored together and simultaneously, they make up a conceptual framework for developing a narrative inquiry. Narrating, therefore, is always an act of intervention.

3. Somewhere in between: Meeting Hugo and Patricia

Hugo is a seventeen-year-old boy, who lives with his parents and two siblings. He is now in the twelfth grade, the final year of secondary school, with a focus on the arts. Born into a working-class family, his dad is a carpenter and his mom is a seamstress. Neither of his parents finished school. His mother left after completing primary level, and his father dropped out before seventh grade. In his narrative, he will justify this lack of education due to poverty, assuming that his parents left school in order to provide for the entire family as there were too many siblings.

As Hugo gets closer to finishing his schooling, he becomes more anxious about what the future might bring him. He has had a considerable number of plans in terms of what he would like to be as a grown-up, but for each of these possibilities he found himself stuck with a barrier, as we will illustrate further. At some point, he considered dropping out of school, but then, among other factors, he realized he would be in trouble, since the national law requires that everyone under eighteen be registered in regular school. Mostly, his wish had

to do with the feeling that school was not going to be able to provide him with the opportunities he needs, in part due to his low grades, which have the power to stop him from going to college. On the other hand, financially, going to college seems impossible simply because his family has no chance of coping with the costs this would entail. Constantly rebuilding his goals as years go by, he now seriously considers a military career. As he puts it, "I considered serving in the army so I could save money to go to college in the future".

The other narrative analyzed in this article is Patricia's, who is also enrolled in an arts program in secondary school. She is seventeen as well, but registered in the eleventh grade, as she dropped out of tenth grade when she was enrolled in a science and technologies program. That choice was the result of pressure from relatives, who would tell her that the ones with a promising future are those studying science in secondary school. When that first tenth grade was ending, though, Patricia realized that the course would not fulfill her personal wishes and dared to change her path. Her parents, of whom she is the only child, were very supportive; a scenario that helped in improving her confidence.

Patricia's mom is currently off work due to a medical leave. She works in a furniture factory and broke her leg in an accident. She can barely walk now, which makes Patricia believe she will be retired for good. Her dad is also a factory worker; actually, he works in the same place as her mom. In her narrative, the student illustrates how strongly she is connected with her parents, while at the same time she clearly establishes the boundaries she expects to frame in regard to them "I want to have a different future from my parents', this is why I have made as much effort as I can all these years, mainly in this one".

Both these students, Hugo and Patricia, come from working-class families, and have financial support from the state regarding schooling expenses. In Portugal, every grade has a compulsory list of books which students must acquire and, due to timetabling and the structure of lessons, they are mostly expected to have lunch at school, which is not free. In order to assist families with schooling costs, the government has a national program aimed at providing subsidies for students' materials and meals. Interested students have to undergo a socioeconomic analysis, and when requests are accepted, they are placed in one of three available categories: A, B, or C. The first category, A, addresses the population with the lowest income conditions, and practically covers all expenses for books and meals. The latter ones offer support, but do not cover all costs.

Hugo is in category B, and Patricia has a category C status. Despite being included in this governmental support, school numbers show that more than half of students receive these benefits, these students' narratives elaborate vulnerability from a distant point of view. Hugo says "I believe I am neither rich nor poor. I am in between these things", while Patricia affirms "I do not know what my future will look like. Here in Portugal, although we have opportunities, these opportunities may not be as huge as they seem". Their narratives emphasize this idea of a place in between, with a strong sense of agency, despite at many times their strategies fail to overcome structural traps. In the

next sections, we will problematize these students' narratives in the light of schooling and future expectations. As they would propose, in between, there will be a debate on opportunities.

3.1. What do schools stand for?

The first empirical step of this research was a focus group involving six students from all three years of secondary school. The participants were chosen randomly with the help of their teachers. Due to the fact that our mediator in the school setting worked in the arts program, all these students were specializing in arts, a situation that might bring more insight in the future when we have data regarding all types of secondary school programs. The participants were aged fifteen to seventeen, included boys and girls and, except for one whose mother was about to open a restaurant, all came from working-class families.

Among other goals, this focus group was interested in contextualizing where we were talking from, and exploring which dilemmas we would have to face during the course of the research regarding youth and schooling. Part of the debate was on the meanings and representations of school. Hugo and Patricia took part in this discussion as well. In general terms, students portrayed school as a place where we learn basic knowledge for the future, where we meet people, friends and teachers who help us grow and, more interestingly, as a refuge; a place where we can leave everything else behind, especially family issues. As one student puts it "Sincerely, school is what, at many times, makes me forget my problems (…) at school, I am in a happy mood, and then, at home [she sighs]".

The definition of school as a refuge is particularly interesting, and while meeting both Hugo and Patricia individually, it emerged once again. For Hugo, "School can be a lot of things. It can be a refuge concerning home issues. It can be a place for learning. By the way, half of our education takes place at school". In Patricia's words:

> I do love my parents, but, sometimes, it is also very exhausting to be at home. They both have [medical] issues. My mother is always in pain. My father works and so on. So, school can be a refuge as well. At school I laugh a lot, I am always laughing.

Refuge, as we see, comes as a counterpart to familial issues. As a concept, it unveils a fundamental part of these students' lives, family socialization, and demonstrates how much they struggle to overcome personal issues. In these terms, school emerges as a balance because it is at this public level where they can become young again, and as such, take life in a more "playful mood" and "laugh a lot". At home, their responsibilities increase, they are required to grow up faster and take part in family issues. In a way, these students face the disadvantage of having to end youth earlier due to aspects concerning context and culture (Ferreira & Nunes, 2010).

Another representation of school regards the idea of socialization, commonly associated as a school role (Abrantes, 2003; Charlot, 2009). School is then a place to meet new and diverse people and make friends. Hugo proves to be a shy person. At first, he talks about friends with reservation. Later, he starts depicting a scenario of plots and traps that a few people, according to him, set for the whole class group. It makes him sick to see how people try to leave other classmates out, deceive them and do things that hurt others. It is in these terms that his position – being apart – takes place. He once tried to change this scenario by talking to other students about "bad people's intentions", but gave up as he realized no one cared:

> There is this story that she [the classmate] sent an e-mail to the teacher asking if she could redo a paper to raise the final grade, and she said that she was speaking for the whole group, not just herself. And she sent that e-mail to the teacher in our group's name, not in her name. And she did the paper, but didn't tell anyone about it. But later, the teacher did not accept it because if she was going to have a new paper, she would set the topic, not the student. Afterwards, the teacher talked to our group in the girl's absence. She showed us the email she sent in our name, but no one knew about it because it was an email she sent to improve her grade, but she did not want us to improve ours. And this is it, well, part of our group sees this side of the girl, but the other part keeps believing her in a naïve way, and they stand by her.

This passage illustrates more than classmates' conflicts. It reminds us of a very competitive scenario in schools, where individuality can prevail. In Portugal, grade point averages are calculated based on secondary school grades and combined with scores on national exams to enter college. It is probably because of this that Patricia, when looking back at her trajectory after insisting that elementary school was not remarkable, affirms "I don't think it was really necessary for me to feel frustrated from the fifth to the ninth grade because those grades do not reflect what I know now and they were unnecessary". Grades play a very important role and can limit opportunities. Considering that students have a common study line in secondary school leads us to infer that a few must be applying for the same undergraduate program in the future, a fact that might collaborate, together with others, to the emergence of competition. Anyway, this is not Hugo's reading. For him, "There is no competitiveness, it is rather disdain. [If it were] competitiveness, we would push one another, we would even help each other in order to find out who would be the best".

In addition to the debate on competitiveness, the relationship with peers at school raises the question of school groups. If a class breaks up into smaller groups, as happened in Hugo's grade, there is a chance that educational relationships will also be weaker (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012). Not bonding with classmates is also seen as a door to indiscipline and deviant behaviors (*idem*). This does not seem to be the case with Hugo's class. As he narrates, the fact that he does not bond with classmates helps him maintain a distance from the whole

class, and he makes very few friends. It is not surprising, though, that he never exemplifies educational relationships in a broader sense that integrates students and teachers, as happens with Patricia. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that despite conflicts, he still finds opportunities for strengthening relationships with classmates. One of them was a school trip to Barcelona.

For Patricia, her current school class represents stronger social ties. As she says, "These two years I have been enrolled in arts are the best years I have ever had. Why? First of all, because the class is excellent. I do have an excellent class". Later, when mentioning remarkable teachers from secondary school, she adds:

> The Geometry teacher, first of all, he is an excellent person, he talks to us as if we were friends. One day, he started crying because we organized a surprise birthday party for him. Basically, all of us in the class were crying because I had never had a class in which respect prevailed in every way. We are so different from each other, considering everything. We are so different from each other, I think this is why there is respect. Naturally, there are also fights, but only verbal, and they are quickly forgotten.

The above excerpt illustrates how educational relationships built over the years are also intermediated by peer relationships. At school, peer ties can be a determinant of how educational dynamics will be incorporated and engaged in by the subjects (Van Zanten, 2000) and also enlighten us in terms of reading the triad of students, colleagues, and teachers. A disruption at any level of the triad can cause a reorganization of how the whole group works.

If we are to answer the question "What do schools stand for?" from the standpoint of students, we could say it is mainly a place to learn the basics and set the foundations for the future, while it also works as a socialization structure, where one can make friends for life, or simply meet people who are diverse in character. For Patricia, "school is a place where you can broaden your horizons, and it makes people smile more, become wiser", and for Hugo, "school is a good stage of our lives, it is more remarkable because it is the first sensation we have regarding life". School is yet a refuge from outside life. In the next section, we go deeper into the ties between school and future. What are the possible futures?

3.2. Rebuilding dreams: There is beauty in accomplishing

Hugo and Patricia seem convinced that without schooling, there is no possible future. They both struggle with school at times, they both face difficulties in certain disciplines and get grades they do not consider good enough, and as such, they often feel frustrated. Hugo has even given some thought to dropping out. Yet they keep going, probably because school is what can define a person's future, according to them.

Not recognizing herself as a poor individual, Patricia organizes in her discourse the reasons why she might not succeed in accomplishing her future

goals. All of them have to do with economic conditions. Her vulnerability emerges as she observes that college is a costly goal; an assumption she makes in her participation in the focus group: "For example, I dream of going to university, but I don't know if I'll succeed, probably because of money. Going to university requires a lot of money". In our biographical meeting, she describes her dream in detail:

> I have realized I have to make an effort to achieve a better future, as my parents will not be able to financially support my education. I have to make an effort to afford it by myself. If I want to go to college, which is a dream of mine, going to university and getting a degree, I need to make the effort by myself, I cannot rely on someone else. I won't ask my parents for money to rent a house, to go to college and things like that.

When assuming her parents cannot afford to support her through a degree, Patricia also reinforces something we have discussed earlier – achieving a future different from her parents. In many passages of her narrative, she comes back to this issue, highlighting various aspects of why she wants a chance to succeed. In one of them, she affirms:

> I see people who are very intelligent, but, for instance, they do not get any support to go to college or university, because they have a C status and so on, and because they do not have this support, they cannot go further. For example, my father, he might be really smart. And he could be working in offices, he could be a lawyer or something like that, but he could not achieve this because he did not have the opportunities when he was younger. Now he works in a furniture factory and he is committed to it. But he is not earning as much as he could, probably, as much as he deserves.

School might be the means to achieve a better future. Yet, in Patricia's view, it is incapable of addressing the issue of social equity, as we live in a time of broken promises (Canário, 2005). In order to have opportunities, one must have the necessary financial resources, as in the case of going to college. What is left, for those outside the privileged circles of society, is to attempt to succeed in school and earn excellent grades that might perhaps result in a scholarship. This student's narrative traps her in the game of herself being solely and entirely responsible for her future. She is the author of her schooling trajectory, but in the mean sense of economic liberalism (Matos, 2013a). Where Patricia cannot overcome structure, she relies on her own efforts. Her main plan is to go to college, but if her plan falls through, she has already come up with an alternative:

> Only next year, I will know better. I was planning to have a gap year after finishing twelfth grade, to save money and learn more. I was even considering applying for a language course, different from what we have here [in school], because it can provide me more opportunities, like going to other schools or taking part in an Erasmus program. I considered this and I thought I could participate in a competition of a faculty in Porto as well. You give them your

papers from secondary school and if you win this competition, you get twelve thousand euros and they cover the cost of your tuition.

Eager to pursue a degree, Patricia is not naïve. Reflecting on her options, she is quite assertive: "I still have to figure out what works better. Probably, it will be the first option, I am going to have a gap year and take a course in the meantime". For Hugo, the prospects are not much better, and as in Patricia's case, he has already set up a backup plan, too.

One aspect in which Hugo differs considerably from Patricia has to do with his attitude towards school. Since Patricia changed her specialization from sciences to arts, she feels accomplished. Hugo, on the other hand, is in a constant battle to find meaning in his schooling process. As Matos (2013b) would define it, both students' relationships with school address an innovation/experimentation mode. It means their history with schooling is something new, it is not inherited, and as such, they are in the process of becoming students, using whatever means they have to be one. Now that she has reached secondary school, Patricia seems more comfortable in the process, while Hugo does not have many other reasons to value it, rather than an illusion of a future. As he says, "I have had more positive than negative experiences [at school] despite being a rebel".

When attempting to elucidate what Hugo meant by "being a rebel", he had some trouble articulating it. His conception pointed to ideas of difference, innovation, and experimentation. In elementary school, being a rebel involved climbing trees when not allowed, playing soccer all the time, and not paying much attention in class. It also meant doing parkour when it was new and everyone considered it outrageous. Secondary school is a milestone in maturing, so he now feels less of a rebel. Nowadays, it is a matter of mood:

> As a student, well, if I wake up on a good day, I pay attention in class, I make an effort. Sometimes, I get more committed in subjects where I have better knowledge. Or in the ones where I have better relationships with the teachers. But, if I wake up on a bad day, nothing is good, nothing at all. I do not want to be at school, I can't stand it, I am always checking what time it is to see if classes are ending, and this is terrible. I do not learn, and do not allow others to learn either, because I am constantly bothering them.

The predominance of good days has not prevented the temptation of abandoning school. When analyzing closely why Hugo does not feel in the mood to put up with his schooling, we find out that grades are the reason. He has had many dreams over the years, but each of them has slowly faded away. One of the most recent, being an architect, was shattered as he realized his grades were not high enough to pursue a career in the field. In the past, he wanted to be a cook and a soccer player. The previous project started when he was very young and vanished as he grew up. In terms of the latter, he understands there are people whose goals are "stronger" than his, "I know I have abilities, but these people are going faster than me, their goals are stronger than mine".

Although Hugo sees his future as a blurry scenario, he thinks of school as the driver for a successful path. When commenting on his parents' conception of school, he says "If they [his parents] think school is for the best, this is what we should pursue, because school is a good thing for us, it is our future". Curiously, in this excerpt, school is not about the future, it is the future itself, as if failing school would mean getting stuck or going nowhere. Actually, this is something Hugo truly believes: "among the people who are mean at school, few of them will be good or not get in trouble with other people. It is unlikely they will not get in trouble or go to jail and things like that".

Hugo believes school is a small frame of what the wider world is like. Its inner relationships are a taste of what might lie outside. Eager to have new experiences in the "outside world", and feeling that it would be hard to accomplish his goal of attending college for economic reasons, he chooses the army as a way out. According to him, he wants to face war, to experience the knowledge of it for himself: "I would like to have my own point of view on wars, not what people say or pictures show, but a view of my own, not others'. I want to interpret war in my own way, not like everyone else says". It is this desire to experience a war that replaces his goal of becoming a soccer player. Moreover, this desire reveals an explicit desire to have a taste of life, to experience something valuable, to find meaning in the journey. In a way, joining the army is a step in Hugo's elaboration of dreams. It could help him earn some spare money to go to college, while offering him a chance to do what he likes:

> I want to have this experience, to know what it feels like. Above all, I want to play sports and the army will give me the chance to do that and, well, I can enjoy and link two things. One has to do with my desire to experience the service, and the other is what I really like doing [sports]. Therefore, I think I have combined the two things in a smart way.

The young students who are involved in our research pursue many dreams. Academically, however, they see them as being a bit distant. One way to make their dreams come true is to find funds for education, be it a scholarship, a competition, or governmental support. The other is by trying to manage their own resources to save money in order to fulfill their ambitions. In either case, both students have redesigned their future expectations along the years. Their goals constantly change, and when faced with adversity, backup plans are made. According to Charlot (2009), adolescents in more vulnerable conditions have to adapt their personal plans constantly. Otherwise, they might face failure repeatedly. This is exactly the reading we have made of Hugo and Patricia's narratives. There is beauty in accomplishing something, and if one cannot pursue a dream, one can at least reframe it.

4. Final considerations: Together in the maze of the future

Schooling processes are a huge challenge that schools have to face. Each student is a unique being with their own life story. At the institution, they

encounter varying purposes and views on life, which result from their primary socializations within their family context, and resocializations they face later in their trajectories (Barbosa, 2007). In this sense, choosing the biographical approach to understand the meanings of these processes seems a reasonable path. A narrative inquiry makes it possible to address temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin et al., 2007). It covers the nature of transition that we acknowledge in people, places, and events. It is also enlightening in terms of social conditions, including the reading of existential conditions and their relationships with the environment. Furthermore, it can cover the issue of place, that is, the concrete, physical, and topological senses of place where the narrated events are located (*ibid.*). The biographical approach is intelligible methodologically, while enlightening, considering that participants inform theory and dialogue with it on a first-person basis. Theory has to be seen as a construction in this approach (Goodson, 2013). It is reformulated and resignified as students narrate themselves.

Hugo and Patricia's narratives are not meant to be illustrative of a general mode of relationships with school. On the contrary, these particular lives show how meaning is built in between the structure and agency, where agency is understood as the capability of finding ways to establish oneself in society, not as the personal responsibility of being the one in charge of every happening in a life story (Matos, 2013a). Their histories shed light on aspects that can be interconnected with other phenomena in educational settings. Particular histories help us gain a glimpse into what it takes to become a student nowadays.

Throughout the knowledge-building process, we find that we, the researchers, have an enormous responsibility. Dealing with our participants demands sensitivity to help them realize that they are the specialists in our research questions (Josselson, 2007). It is from this standpoint that we have preferred to problematize the margins within the idea of sensitive zones (Van Zanten, 2000) rather than peripheries. Our contexts were chosen according to human development indices (Gonçalves et al., 2012; SDE, 2014), but it was never our intention to label places or people. As a result, we conclude that the narratives contemplated in this article also break with such labels. Neither Hugo nor Patricia feel they are living in the margins. Even the school setting is repositioned, as it is seen as a core context where meaningful relationships take place. In this sense, it supports students' refusal of a peripheral identity (Silva, 2010); a position the institution occupies in a broader scenario.

Both narratives reveal subjects that define themselves not in terms of absences, but rather in terms of their goals and their efforts to accomplish them. Despite the numerous barriers the students face both socially and economically, they do not claim an identity of vulnerability. Family, which is sometimes a battleground, thus justifying schools as a refuge from problems, is also a space for support. As hard as it has been to cope with school, the students feel they cannot disappoint their parents because they have made a

large investment in them. These young people feel their future is their own responsibility, but on many occasions they are holding on to a familial project. Their educational triumphs can be read as familial achievements, as parents and relatives trust in their capabilities and support their education.

The fact that secondary school seems more meaningful to these students may have different representations. First, it might have to do with a memory aspect. They are experiencing school right now, thus it is more eminent and easier to recall and has the impact of being an authorial project (Rodrigues, 2013). They chose a secondary school program in the arts and therefore it feels like the curriculum is not a vertical imposition. As both Hugo and Patricia stated, it is the first time they were engaged in things they really cared about. In Patricia's case, this is an even greater accomplishment because she had previously done a sciences program and knows what it feels like to be somewhere she still did not want to be when reaching secondary level.

From the point of view of school, dealing with so many individuals is challenging, because "massification" movements have brought a large amount of profiles, often with conflicting perspectives – a situation that is even more problematic at the secondary school level (Matos, 2013a). In Portugal, the number of dropouts in secondary school is still high. According to Statistics Portugal data, 14% of people between 18 and 24 years old did not complete secondary school in the country in 2016.[1] In this sense, Hugo and Patricia's trajectories emphasize how much effort one has to make in order to integrate with the institution. The power of law, we assume, is not enough to keep young students enrolled in school.

Finally, a word on opportunities. Moving from the time of promises to the time of doubts (Canário, 2005), we infer that schools have not yet found adequate ways to address equity. Patricia's struggle to fit in the governments' support programs demonstrate how one has only thin lines to grasp for hope. Recovering Derouet's analysis (2002, 2010), new educational mandates require comprehending education democratization according to a project that considers the hegemony of capitalism and recognizes the non-existence of a single definition of the *Common Good*. In the meantime, we must deal with a system which stresses educational responsibility through individual commitment. Hugo and Patricia are excellent and singular examples of how one is forced to rebuild goals in this maze of educational future. They are not alone.

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