

Narratives of a teacher researcher in the prevention of drug use by students

ARTICLE

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Summary

The objectives of this text are to present, discuss and deepen some issues brought by an academic memoir of a doctoral thesis that sought to contribute to the prevention of drug use among schoolchildren. Through the autobiographical narrative, it presents how the theme of drugs indirectly integrated the personal and academic life of the main author of the text and discusses how this theme crossed his professional performance, leading him to carry out a doctoral study that would help him to better understand this phenomenon. It proposes that initial training courses incorporate, in their curricula, contents and disciplines that address the issue of early drug use among schoolchildren. It concludes with a proposal of guidelines that teachers, those responsible for students and education systems can follow to (re)think prevention carried out in schools.

Keywords: Drugs at school. Training memorial. Autobiographical narrative. Teacher training. Prevention.

Narrativas de um professor investigador na prevenção do consumo de drogas entre os alunos

Abstrato

Este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar, discutir e aprofundar algumas das questões levantadas por um memorial acadêmico, que compôs uma tese de doutorado que buscou contribuir para a prevenção do uso de drogas entre estudantes. Através de uma narrativa autobiográfica, este trabalho apresenta como a temática das drogas fez, indiretamente, parte da vida do autor principal do texto na sua vida pessoal e acadêmica, bem como a forma como esta temática atravessou a sua vida profissional, levando-o a interessar-se pela realização de um estudo de doutoramento, que o ajudasse a compreender melhor este fenômeno. Propõe que os cursos de formação inicial incluam em seus currículos conteúdos e disciplinas que abordem a questão do uso precoce de drogas entre os estudantes. Conclui fazendo encaminhamentos para que professores, responsáveis e sistemas de ensino retomem um caminho para (re)pensar a prevenção que é implementada nas escolas.

Palavras-chave: Drogas na escola. Memorial formativo. Narrativa autobiográfica. Formação de professores. Prevenção.

1 Introduction

The use of licit and illicit drugs by students is a growing phenomenon due to the large number of adolescents who start using these substances, as signaled by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in the four editions of the National School Health Survey (PeNSE), carried out in 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2019 (IBGE, 2009; 2013; 2016; 2021).

Alcohol consumption by adolescents - a legal substance considered an important risk factor for the use of other drugs (CERUTTI; RAMOS; ARGIMON, 2015) - has remained at a high level for more than a decade. As PeNSE reveals, in 2009, 22.1% of the students who participated in the study had already been drunk at least once in their lives (IBGE, 2009); in 2012, this figure remained practically stable, totaling 21.8% of those investigated (IBGE, 2013); in 2015, this rate was 21.4% (IBGE, 2016); in the latest edition of PeNSE, in 2019, it was found that "[...] 34.6% of schoolchildren aged 13 to 17 had taken their first dose of alcoholic beverage under the age of 14" and that, among those who had consumed alcoholic beverages at least once in their lives, 47.0% had already been drunk (IBGE, 2021, p. 74).

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2 Methodological itinerary

As we have already made clear, we will return to and deepen some issues present in the academic memorial that every PPGEBs student needs to build in the writing of their thesis. If memory can be understood as the raw material of the memorial, since it brings "the mental capacity to represent the past in the present" (XAVIER et al., 2021, p. 10), there should be no doubt that the construction of a memorial "aims to found the past, to establish it before everyone" (SCARPIM; TREVISAN, 2018, p. 142).

In this sense, the importance of writing a memorial can be summarized in a thought by Pena (2017, p. 78), for whom "The rescue of a memory that reveals a significant experience brings possibilities not only of resignification of the already lived, but also of an action in the present". Regarding the role of the person who produces an autobiographical narrative, it should be emphasized that, according to Passeggi and Cunha (2013, p. 45), "In autobiographical narratives, the person who writes is, at the same time, the empirical author of the text, the narrator and the protagonist of the story's plot". For this reason, it was not surprising that, when revisiting the memoir written in the thesis, I ended up¹ engulfed by a spiral of recollections of facts and memories that, at the time of the construction of the memorial, had not been incorporated into the finalized text of the thesis.

This text, therefore, will bring to the reader a past that has been remembered and that will be presented as I can remember it. This happens because "Memory, when released by recollection through narrative, allows the intersection between past and

¹ We have chosen to write the text in the first person plural because we consider the writing of a thesis to be a collective construction between the student and the supervisor. In passages such as this one, when we refer to the life experiences of the main author of this text, the first person singular will be used.

present, since we remember what we were and lived yesterday from what we are and live today" (PENA, 2017, p. 78).

It should be reaffirmed that, in this text, the autobiographical narrative is constructed as memory occurs: in a constant coming and going, without major concerns with the chronology of the facts, but with fidelity to the events, the memories and the feelings aroused by them in the way they occurred. I say this to affirm to the reader, without any kind of fear, that the writing presented in this article starts from "One of the characteristics of memory [which] is selectivity, the result of the complex process of debugging what should or should not be perceived in individual or collective experience" (PORTELLI, 2020, p. 21).

The memoir revisited in this article presents, therefore, a narrative not only of my entire life path from the moment I became interested in the theme of drugs and studying how these substances can affect the school environment, but also of moments prior to this process, which were only noticed and placed as a target of analysis when the use of drugs by adolescents and young people of school age became my object of study.

Passeggi and Cunha (2013, p. 45) explain that authorship in an autobiographical narrative occurs when:

[...] through language operations and comprises cognitive and socio-historical processes by which the person who writes appropriates his experiences and constitutes himself through the act of writing as an author while reinventing his human condition. It is not, therefore, a matter of expressing oneself through language, but of constituting oneself through the act of language (PASSEGI; CUNHA, 2013, p. 45).

The above passage drew my attention to the fact that, in order to deal with the process by which I became a teacher-researcher in the field of prevention of drug use by schoolchildren, I should return to memories of family life (when I was educated in a certain way about drugs) and my academic life (from elementary school to higher education, when I had indirect experiences with drugs) and then deal with how the phenomenon of drugs presented itself in my professional life.

3 My life and drugs: situations experienced by an outsider[The outsider should be understood as an individual who deviates from the rules of a group (BECKER, 2008). In the case of drug studies, an outsider is a person who has never used drugs, but researches them].

Before I go into my reminiscences, I must point out that I talk about drugs as an outsider, even though these substances have been indirectly present in my life since very early. I say this because I have never been and, to this day, I am not a user of licit or illicit drugs. Nor have I had any member of my close family circle, or anyone with whom I lived, who regularly used licit or illicit drugs, in a problematic or non-problematic way, either inside or outside the home.

3.1 Personal life²

The only rare times I can remember my father, Agnaldo, drinking alcohol were when my godparents (and/or my sister's) visited us, on the occasion of our birthdays or some other festive date, such as "Christmas" and "Children's Day". Since both godparents were not comfortable with my father buying beer just for them to drink, he pretended to drink with them as well. There were very few occasions when I saw my father drink more than one glass of beer, and most of the time I remember that more than half of the contents of his glass were thrown away in the kitchen sink moments after the visitors had left.

Studying the topic of drugs, I realized that, even without knowing it, my father's attitudes of not using licit drugs, never consuming illicit drugs, both inside and outside the home (in bars or social gatherings), and discouraging me from drinking alcohol every time I could think of drinking alcohol (such as at carnival and parties) served as an important protective factor, so that I did not try these substances in adolescence. Studies such as the one published by Cerutti, Ramos and Argimon (2015) reveal that affection and example,

² Whenever necessary, the recollections will be accompanied by theoretical reflections based on quotes from experts in the field of research on drugs and their effects.

as well as monitoring and guidance, can function as protective factors against early use in adolescence and prevent young people from becoming adults who consume drugs in a problematic way. Another research, published by Elicker et al. (2015), points out that the family can be an important favorer and even the place of initiation of adolescents and young people in the use of narcotics.

In the transition phase between my childhood and adolescence, I remember playing on the terrace of my house at dusk and seeing young people and adults smoking drugs sitting on the Vitória-Minas Railway, located behind a wall, now nonexistent, of the former Companhia Vale do Rio Doce, in front of the soccer field of Esporte Clube Itaquari, on Muniz Freire Street, in the Itaquari neighborhood, municipality of Cariacica.

3.2 Academic life

I remember three situations of people using narcotics in the vicinity of the institutions (or inside them) in which I studied, but without any kind of problematization by teachers and other education professionals.

In the first episode, which occurred during my elementary school years, a young couple of boyfriends were using drugs in the middle of the afternoon, in a vacant lot located on the side of the "Escola de Primeiro Grau Oliveira Castro", located in the Itaquari neighborhood. They stayed on the first floor, behind a wall, but immediately below the windows of my class, the 5th grade (our current 6th grade), which I attended in 1988. I remember that year well, because it was the only one of the whole elementary school that I studied in the afternoon shift.

When we returned from recess, a strong and characteristic smell of what I would only learn many years later was marijuana would invade our classroom. Even before the teacher arrived in the classroom, my classmates and I were already hanging out the windows due to the curiosity that this strong odor aroused in us. I remember Pedro, the only classmate who seemed to understand what was happening, putting his head out of

the window and shouting "stop it, drugs are drugs", and watching the couple quickly leave the place.

Lembro-me também que a professora entrou em nossa sala de aula, descobriu o que estava acontecendo e ignorou, mandando que todos nós nos sentássemos e abrísssemos o livro didático para que ela pudesse continuar com suas tarefas escolares. Se hoje em dia, como vimos, os professores se sentem despreparados para lidar com a questão das drogas nas escolas (ARALDI et al. 2012; CHAGAS et al., 2017; PEREIRA; PAES; SANCHEZ, 2016), imagino como não deveriam se sentir os professores desinformados no final da década de 1980. Além disso, os poucos materiais didáticos que os professores dispunham naquela época para trabalhar a prevenção ao uso de drogas nas escolas, até a década de 1990, eram tanto imprecisos quanto buscavam amedrontar professores e alunos, ao invés de informá-los (LOUREIRO; QUEIROZ, 2018).

No ensino médio, lembro-me de um dia, no decorrer do ano letivo de 1995, quando "matei" aula com outros três colegas para jogar basquete em duplas na quadra da antiga Escola Técnica Federal do Espírito Santo (ETFES), hoje Instituto Federal do Espírito Santo (IFES) e fui surpreendido, no intervalo para o descanso do jogo, por dois deles fumando um enorme charuto de maconha. Fiquei perplexo com a situação; não que, àquela altura de minha vida, nunca tivesse visto outras pessoas usando drogas ou não soubesse que o uso dessas substâncias acontecia, mas como já estávamos cabulando aulas, não gostaria de chamar a atenção dos inspetores escolares e ser punido também por algo que eu não estava fazendo (uso de drogas).

Luckily for me, my basketball partners didn't even offer the cigarette for me or the other teammate to try. As much as I believe I wouldn't have tried it, I don't know today, looking back, if I would have actually resisted the offer if I had been the only one in the quartet not to try that marijuana roll-up. I say this because it is already known that pressure from friends who use drugs, living with people involved in drug trafficking and the easy circulation of narcotics within schools increase the vulnerability of adolescents and young people (CERQUEIRA et al., 2011; DE JESUS et al., 2017; ELICKER et al., 2015; SILVA, 2016).

After the episode, I never missed class again to play basketball with that pair of classmates, but it is likely that other students who experience similar situations will not take the same action. This is because, often, adolescents, in the quest to build their self-esteem, to gain the approval of their peers and even to achieve popularity (PAPALIA; MARTORELL, 2022; SANTROCK, 2014) can assume risky behaviors, such as experimenting with drugs. This is not to say that a single such experience can get someone hooked. However, we are aware that many people start using these substances by imitating a reference figure for them and often move towards more continuous consumption when they live in a social circle that revolves around drugs (HART, 2014, p. 96).

During higher education, in the undergraduate course in Physical Education, held at the Federal University of Espírito Santo (UFES), between 2004 and 2007, the theme of drugs was present in a tangential way through the discussion about the effects and use of anabolic steroids. As for legal (tobacco and alcohol) and illegal substances (marijuana, cocaine, loló, crack, LSD, among others), we did not receive any information, nor was the possibility of working with students who had experimented or were drug users discussed with us.

However, once again, I witnessed episodes of people consuming narcotics within the academic space. Two colleagues from my class and students from other classes used to go to the gymnasium, a place with low circulation of people and close to the athletics track where we had classes, to smoke marijuana. Although, at university, it was not uncommon to hear in the classroom some report of colleagues who already worked in schools located in regions that suffered from drug trafficking, my teachers in higher education were never interested in dealing with the subject. In this way, I entered professional life without any information or knowledge built about the topic.

3.3 Working life

In my professional life, as a teacher of basic education, my first experiences with drugs did not take place inside schools, but around two Municipal Centers for Early

Childhood Education (CMEIs) in which I worked and which are located in regions where the drug trafficking war is present. However, due to the infantile condition of my students - ranging from 6 months to 5 years old - I did not work with children who, according to my knowledge, had accidentally or not ingested any licit or illicit drug.

The situation changed a lot when I started teaching in state primary and secondary schools in the municipalities of Guarapari, between 2012 and 2013, and Serra, between 2016 and 2017. As I have always maintained a very close and open relationship with my students and liked to spend recess on the court and in the yard playing with them, I ended up, probably because of this proximity, hearing some facts about the lives of these subjects that probably few teachers had access to.

The confidences that most impressed and bothered me were related to the experimentation of drugs, mainly legal ones, such as alcohol, but also illegal ones, such as marijuana, by students in the 13-17 age group. I tried to talk to each of these students who opened up to me, in a reserved way and explained my abstemious stance on drug use, without false moralisms or moral judgments. Despite my stance, I felt that something was missing on my part in the dialogues I established with them. Even though I had lived through these episodes, it was the experience I had in 2016 with students from a shift in which I did not work that meant a milestone in my life and ended up awakening me to the need to seek to build better training on drug prevention in the school environment.

The afternoon work shift had ended and I, as usual, had gotten excited about the class and forgot to end it five minutes before the end of the hour so that my students could help me put away all the games and support materials used that day. It took me about 30 minutes to put everything away, just enough time for the afternoon students to leave the school and the evening classes, from the Youth and Adult Education (EJA), to start arriving at school for their classes. When I went to get the last equipment to put in my locker, I passed by a more isolated part of the schoolyard, which was already quite dark because night had already fallen, and I realized that three students were sharing a marijuana cigarette. I didn't react and pretended I didn't see it; I didn't know what to do; I didn't know the students, but I reported the case to the school administration.

I returned home and learned the next day that the institution's managers had taken the initiative to go from room to room professing a moralistic discourse on drugs, with the intention that this action would inhibit drug use by those students. To make matters worse, some sheets printed on sheets of sulfite paper, A4 size, were fixed by the schoolyard, with the following saying: "If you use outside, your problem. If you use it inside, it's our problem! Smile, you're being filmed!".

One of the forms was positioned in the area of the courtyard where the drug use occurred, so as to leave no doubt in the minds of the student users that the message was for them. Fulfilling the threat the poster promised, the lighting in the part of the courtyard where the marijuana cigarette had been shared was increased and one of the several security cameras that already existed in the school was strategically directed to the same location.

The school, its managers and evening teachers, faced with flagrant impotence and lack of knowledge about how they should act with their students, took the quickest and easiest initiative: **to ignore the problem and prevent it from continuing to occur within the school space**. As we have seen before, scaring confuses, generates myths around drug use and does not have the desired effect of helping prevention (LOUREIRO; QUEIROZ, 2018). Because I did not conform to this situation, I ended up building the thesis whose memorial was revisited and problematized in this text.

4 Final considerations

In view of the reflections constructed in this article, we consider it important to point out some referrals so that teachers, those responsible for students and education systems can (re)think the prevention carried out in schools.

The facts presented from the academic life of the main author of the text narrated a path through which he lived indirectly with drugs. This can happen to any student in Brazilian schools and can even happen in a more direct way. A common argument of teachers to avoid addressing the issue at school is the belief that, through a potential

discussion on the subject, adolescents and young people will be awakened to experiment with narcotics. However, it is not by failing to address the problem that it will cease to exist. In addition, it is much better that students receive information about drugs at school, with people who know about the subject, than to continue to be guided by common sense and moralizing attitudes, which push these subjects even more towards experimentation and regular consumption of such substances. For this reason, we believe that informing students about drugs and their problems and working to prevent their use are functions that the school and its teachers cannot shy away from assuming. However, in order for teachers to accept and develop such assignments with peace of mind, they need access to scientific knowledge about these toxic substances and the effects they cause in their users.

To this end, it is necessary to build continuing education programs aimed at preventing drug use with teachers, not on or for them. What we mean by this is that teachers need to be heard about their fears, anxieties and expectations, so that continuing education offers scientific content that responds to the demands placed by them, helping them to build the knowledge necessary for prevention in school to happen.

Several health professionals, such as psychologists, doctors, nurses and occupational therapists, can be invited to help educators in these meetings, but we reaffirm that the role of working with prevention on a daily basis at school is that of teachers and not of people outside the school environment. Another factor that can help determine whether schools will succeed or fail in preventing drug use is the educational style adopted by them: democratic and welcoming schools tend to be protective of drug use; institutions that are too busy being content-based, with little concern for the physical and mental well-being of their students, tend to worsen vulnerability, as they are unable (or even unwilling) to be protective of drug use at an early age by students.

We recall that both those responsible for the students and the school can act as protective factors or produce an even greater vulnerability to drug use by school-age subjects. Therefore, we emphasize that the students' loved ones must be involved in this preventive process. To this end, the school needs to carry out awareness campaigns with parents and guardians regarding the risks involved in experimenting with licit and illicit

drugs at an early age: both in relation to potential problematic use in the future, as well as the health problems that drug use can produce. Monitoring, guidance and examples of non-use of these substances, wherever possible, should be encouraged among parents.

Initial teacher training courses should also incorporate into their curricula content and/or subjects that address the issue of early drug use among schoolchildren. We believe that this action can give a minimum apparatus to future teachers so that they do not feel unprepared to deal with the theme, if they discover that they have a student experimenting with drugs or sometimes having problems with them.

We hope that this text will help other teachers who become interested in the theme of drugs in the school environment to realize the complexity of the phenomenon and to understand that dialogue, sensitivity and continuing education should be the fundamental way for schools to build realistic continuing education programs, capable of stripping members of the school community (not only teachers and students, but also those responsible for them) of prejudices and stereotypes crystallized in common sense. If these substances did not, to some extent, bring pleasure to their consumers, the number of drug users around the world would not be as high as it is.

Finally, we recommend that new and more in-depth studies be carried out with school teachers from the most diverse locations throughout Brazil, to understand the knowledge that teachers have about drugs and to propose different ways to assist them in the construction of prevention programs as heterogeneous and plural as necessary.

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