

Life-education-profession narratives in a multigrade classroom

ARTICLE

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1

Abstract

We reflect on training and self training processes experienced in recent years, with the aim of narrating life training experiences and teaching practice in a multigrade rural classroom. To this end, we discuss aspects of personal and professional life, based on theoretical considerations constructed in the doctorate in Educação e Contemporaneidade at the Universidade do Estado da Bahia (UNEB). The texture of the work is based on an (auto)biographical approach, supported by a research diary and children's narratives. It is pertinent to clarify that the experiences analyzed here were experienced by the first author of the text, however the writing and construction of the work was carried out by four hands. These experiences lead us to debate about the arduous and continuous process of self formation as people, teachers and researchers. As results and discussion, we point out the formative and (self)transformative power of narrative reflexivity, whether in the narratives of adults – teachers in training, or in the narratives of children.

Keywords: Teaching practice. Multigrade room. (Auto)biographical narratives.

Narrativas de vida-formação-profissão em sala de aula multisseriada

Resumo

Refletimos sobre processos de formação e (auto)formação vivenciados nos últimos anos, com o objetivo de narrar experiências de vida-formação e prática docente em uma sala de aula rural multisseriada. Para tal, discutimos aspectos da vida pessoal e profissional, a partir de ponderações teóricas construídas no doutoramento em Educação e Contemporaneidade da Universidade do Estado da Bahia (UNEB). A tessitura do trabalho assenta numa abordagem (auto)biográfica, com apoio em diário de pesquisa e nas narrativas das crianças. É pertinente esclarecer que as experiências aqui analisadas foram vivenciadas pela primeira autora do texto, no entanto a escrita e a construção do trabalho realizou-se a quatro mãos. Essas experiências nos conduzem ao debate sobre o árduo e contínuo processo de (auto)formação como gente, professores, investigadores. Como resultados e discussões apontamos o poder formativo e (auto)transformador da reflexividade narrativa, seja nas narrativas de adultos – professores em formação, seja na narrativa de crianças.

Palavras-chave: Prática docente. Sala multisseriada. Narrativas (auto)biográficas.

1 Introduction

Building a human being, a we, is a job that doesn't give you a break: there will be fragile walls, miscalculations, cracks. Perhaps a piece will collapse. But there will also be windows to the landscape and balconies to the sun (Luft, 2003, p. 18).

2

This work is a form of resistance and reinvention; it is an (auto)biographical narrative, with reflections on writing about oneself, which changes me/us as people, teachers, researchers; and about looking and listening sensitively in the relationship and experiences *with* children. As Luft (2013) points out, this work of human constitution is continuous and includes weaknesses, challenges, negotiations with oneself and with others, mistakes and growth.

In this sense, the general objective of this article is to narrate experiences of life-formation and teaching practice in a multigroup classroom, based on theoretical considerations built up during the course of the doctorate in Education and Contemporaneity at the State University of Bahia (UNEB). It is important to clarify that the experiences analyzed here were lived by the first author of the text, but the writing and construction of the work was done by four hands. For this reason, in some parts of the text we use the third person plural, in other parts the first person singular.

We have organized the narrative of this text in moments that integrate and intertwine; first, we present the approach and methodology of the text; then, we narrate how the work of self-writing and co-authorship crosses us, pointing out experiences of teaching practice, and working with children in a multi-serial rural school.

2 Metodologia

The text is born from the combination of reflections on training, (auto)training and teaching practice, with contributions from (auto)biographical research and self-writing. (Auto)biographical research and self-writing shed light on our ideas, considerations and the construction of our ongoing doctoral research - *Narrativas e escritos (auto)biográficas de*

crianças sobre escola rural de Mossoró/RN (Narratives and (auto)biographical writings of children in a rural school in Mossoró/RN).

In view of the nature of the text, the (auto)biographical approach is an appropriate research method and device on which to base the construction. Biographical approaches in education, as Passeggi (2021, p. 93) considers, despite their diversity, have as a common assumption the transformative power of the action of narrating lived experience. “They admit that narrative reflexivity gives the person who narrates the possibility of making sense of what they didn’t have before and, by narratively ordering events, they (re)construct another version of themselves and their education.”

Biographical approaches in education have two founding assumptions in common that are worth remembering to begin with.

The first is that the action of narrating and reflecting on lived experiences, or those in the process of becoming, allows us to make sense of what has happened, what is happening, what may change or remain unchanged, but also what could have happened and for what reasons. All these options of temporality must be considered as open possibilities, which reveals both the complexity of narration and its power of self-(trans)formation. The second assumption is that in this act of language, the person who narrates reconstructs a version of themselves by rethinking their relationships with others and with the world of life. There are many cognitive, volitional or involuntary operations involved in the daily practice of telling and listening to stories, but we rarely realize the complexity of these eminently human activities. And as much as these assumptions have, throughout history, become the object of philosophical, historical, sociological, educational and psychological understanding, there is even greater interest in continuing the reflections that have begun and are ongoing (Passeggi, 2021, p. 94-95).

It is these delicate and open-ended constructions and reconstructions that we address in the text. As we narrate, we listen to narratives and we analyze these accounts, we remake ourselves, change ourselves and therefore think better about our pedagogical praxis, our performance as researchers, our ways of being and living in the world.

According to Passeggi (2021, p. 104), in order to understand the power of narrative reflexivity, “it is necessary to consider three movements: the retrospective, focused on the past; the prospective, which projects itself into the future, and the inspective, which takes

place in the present, on the basis of which what has happened, could have happened or could happen is examined, inspected and evaluated”.

In this process of narrating, fears can arise about the uncertainties surrounding the future, and ghosts from the past. However, it is necessary to narrate! To broaden our experiences of the present. And, above all, to constitute ourselves as process and becoming. “These are the founding marks of narrative reflexivity in our biographical condition, that of being narrators, who temporally link present, past and future events in a plot with a beginning, middle and end, or “without a beginning or an end”, but a plot...” (Passeggi, 2021, p. 104).

In this space, as in previous texts, we rely on records from the research diary and the narratives of the children with whom I work as a teacher¹. The research diary and the narratives have made it possible to “watch me/us go by”.

I write, reflect and return to my writings, revisiting actions and the solutions I find to everyday issues/problems. These reflections have been potentially formative for me, and in my relationships in the classroom; so that this constant exercise of writing about oneself and sensitive listening helps me to build myself; to understand children's education as broad human formation; in a desire to do research with a different rigor and quality (Rodrigues, 2021, p. 2).

Unfortunately, as Passeggi (2021, p. 110) points out, the autobiographical subject is still very timidly given the right of citizenship in the scientific world. This universe is “marked by the most severe residual restrictions of a paradigm that associates subjectivity and singularity with fictionality and irrationality, dissociating ‘life, lived experience and science’ as proposed by Dilthey (2010)”. This right to scientific citizenship is still a constant struggle in the world of adults, who always need to reaffirm and defend their word. The situation is more delicate when it comes to children's words, which are often invalidated and considered illegitimate, as the focus tends to be on what they don't yet know and need to learn, rather than on their ability to reflect on their own experience.

¹ I'm temporarily away from the classroom on training leave.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Self-writing in process and in becoming

We understand that autobiographical reflection, in this case recorded largely through the personal diary, is justified in the exercise, which we believe is necessary, of reviewing oneself. As I have pointed out in my career, writing about myself has helped me not to remain on the sidelines, and has helped me to constantly authorize myself as a teacher, researcher and woman (Rodrigues, 2018; Rodrigues, 2019).

Philippe Artières (1998, p. 11), discussing archiving one's own life, points out that “writing a diary, keeping papers, as well as writing an autobiography, are practices that participate more in what Foucault called the preoccupation with the self”. Archiving one's life is thus “putting oneself in the mirror, countering the social image with the intimate image of oneself, and in this sense the archiving of the self is a practice of self-construction and resistance”.

This construction of the self is an arduous and constant task; I have been archiving myself through my research/personal diary since the end of 2015, when I began to put down on paper, in a more organized way, my interest in narratives in my life as a whole, as a teacher, researcher, woman, co-author of myself.

Thus, my interest in autobiographical narratives initially arose from my encounter with the Research Diary (Barbosa, 2010), after my master's research entitled *Qualidade em Educação no Ensino Médio Inovador: o entendimento dos professores e dos autores sob a ótica da contextualização de Stephen Ball* (Quality in Education in Innovative High School: the understanding of teachers and authors from the perspective of Stephen Ball's contextualization), developed in the Postgraduate Program in Education at the State University of Rio Grande do Norte (POSEDUC/UERN) in the line of research: Policies and management of education, funded by Capes.

After completing my master's degree in education, I started reading about the research diary and practicing it. I started writing my research diary, which I call my Personal Diary (PD), at the end of 2015, when I completed my master's degree in education and

began my teaching career as a teacher of the early years of elementary school in the city of Mossoró/RN. The way in which my master's journey took place was one of the triggers/motivators for writing the Research/Personal Diary.

In short, I found it difficult to authorize myself in the process of writing the dissertation, so I could hardly see myself in the final writing of the text. The post-structural approach - which I was using at the time - allowed me, to a certain extent, to see the research subjects as co-authors of policy productions in the context of practice. “However, in terms of my training, meeting the demands and standards of academia seemed to be more important than daring to become the author of my work” (Rodrigues, 2018, p. 5).

The turbulence I experienced during my master's degree initially immobilized me, but it also unveiled in me a process of maturing and a desire to continue my initial training as a researcher from a perspective that took into account narratives and self-writing. After all, it is these writings and narratives that have enabled me to reflect on myself and my teaching practice, as well as helping me to authorize myself for life. This process of biography is built individually and collectively, in dialogues, guidance, meetings of the (Auto)Biography, Training and Oral History Research Group (Grafho), in everyday moments.

In 2022, I started my doctorate in education at the State University of Bahia (UNEB), where I am carrying out scientific research with children from the school I work at, based on their narratives and writings, in a multi-subject classroom in the countryside of Rio Grande do Norte. What motivates us to carry out research using an (auto)biographical approach is the possibility of theorizing about the subjects being researched and reflecting narratively on themselves.

In a seminar held in 2024, Professor Luís Porta highlighted a fundamental element of the (auto)biographical approach, which we intend to emphasize throughout this text: if there is one thing that can be affirmed from the (auto)biographical perspective, it is that we do not come out of relationships, experiences, experiments or research unscathed.

Working and living from this perspective makes us better people; we take better care of nature and of others. We can reiterate, as we have said in other narrative texts, that

we live this experience of constantly remaking ourselves together with others, and from this reconstruction our discussions are born.

In this sense, we need to reflect on what kind of world we want to create. What kind of research do we want to do? Involved, situated research that considers and makes visible the voices of subjects who are often socially invisible. Research in which we can hope for a better world with social justice and equity.

3.2 On the trails of teaching: experiences with rural schools

Nobody starts being an educator on a certain Tuesday at four in the afternoon. No one is born an educator or marked out to be an educator. One becomes an educator, one is permanently formed as an educator in practice and in reflection on practice (Freire, 1991, p. 58).

We become educators constantly, in practice, in training and in reflection-action-reflection on practice. I am the daughter of a teacher and, since I was little, teaching has appeared as one of the possible professions for me, although the closer I got to teaching, the more worried my mother became, as she had experience of the difficulties and challenges of the career and didn't want me to pursue it.

I experienced teaching informally through different experiences: Helping my mother with her tasks at the nursery school and in the early years of elementary school; taking part in the pedagogical practices and experiences of the schools, from decorating the classroom to selecting songs and nursery rhymes; in planning moments; in the typing course and in the moments of mimeographing activities, which often took place in the service area of my house; in experiences with lay literacy, especially for children; in working as a literacy and literacy monitor in the Mais Educação project, among others.

I officially started teaching in 2015, through a civil service job, when I was finishing my master's degree in Education. Starting my teaching career with a multigrade 4th/5th grade class was extremely difficult and challenging. These were pupils who had spent the first six months of the year without lessons and welcomed any new professional with great

trepidation, given that the tendency of the teachers assigned to the school was to move to the urban area as soon as possible.

The entries in my personal diary record some of the anguish of that period, and the strategies I created *with* the students in an attempt to make the teaching-learning process more enjoyable, and in some way help them to have hope in themselves and in school. In short, many of the students in this class, who were in fifth grade, were still unable to read and write formally and were already showing a lack of interest in continuing their studies, because it was instilled in their minds and bodies that they couldn't learn, so it wasn't worth the effort.

As for rural education in the context of the city of Mossoró/RN, we have at our disposal the recent Law No. 3677, of November 30, 2018, which establishes the municipal rural education policy within the municipal education network of Mossoró. However, the municipal government of Mossoró/RN has not begun to implement this law. The current orientation in rural schools is to work in the same way as urban schools, in other words, from an urban-centric perspective, following the BNCC, with textbooks that are the same as those in the city.

We still have a feeling of inferiority and abandonment of rural schools when we look at local rural education policies and municipal actions. We are left on the sidelines of many actions, because we don't have a curriculum for rural schools or a Pedagogical Political Project (PPP) that takes into account the singularities of rural schools and communities. In addition, we do not have access to various resources, including auxiliary teachers for students with special educational needs, as this would require paying for these people to travel to rural areas. We also have no training to work as educators in rural schools and multi-grade classes.

When we revisited the personal diary entries, we found several records about problems with the children's school transport and the teachers' transport, among other issues, such as the excessive demands and prioritization of the children's literacy by the Municipal Network and school management, to the detriment of other knowledge. Here are two excerpts from her personal diary (PD):

In the school environment in which we work, we face various difficulties. In the last year, we've faced everything from the theft of school equipment; delays in paying teachers and other staff; poor quality school meals; and problems with school transportation. We also faced administrative and pedagogical problems. We spent almost the entire year without supervision and pedagogical support. In addition, the school principal, who had worked at the school for 11 years, also asked to be transferred (to the city). It's not easy working in rural areas. If we face many problems in the city, these difficulties are multiplied in rural areas. In short, it was a 'rushed' year in which we didn't manage to complete most of the projects proposed for the year. But it was also a year of resistance in which we tried everything we could. A period in which I tried to contextualize my lessons more and bring the students into the learning game (Personal Diary - Thursday, December 15, 2016).

The first week of classes already started with a setback, as the car that takes the teachers broke down on the first day of classes, and we had to get another car (Personal Diary - Monday, March 6, 2017).

In recent years, despite all the obstacles and difficulties we face on a daily basis, we have looked proudly at the school where we work. Perhaps there will be more appreciation for the voices that make it up. After seven years of work and dedication in this space and with the renewal of the teaching team, with a 100% permanent staff (no longer contractual) that has remained the same for the last five years, we can already see small improvements in the teaching and learning processes. We have organized a library space and we have been able to see children who are literate (this is one of the main demands of the municipal network and also of their parents) and reading fluently before completing the literacy cycle. In this process, we have tried to work with games, which are not always well accepted or well regarded in adult eyes, always needing to be justified, as if playing and games were something of lesser importance. The results we've seen are the result of a collective effort, mainly by a team of committed teachers and the children's families, who have been getting closer to supporting their children. The children are increasingly interested in seeing school as a place where they can express themselves, grow, learn, socialize, play, make friends and live.

One of the major problems the school has faced since its creation 20 years ago is the intense rotation of professionals, so that pedagogical work suffers many interruptions.

In addition, the municipality has not yet introduced democratic management, which also makes it difficult to provide constant pedagogical and administrative support.

We continue to learn as we go, after all, “[...] no one walks without learning to walk, without learning to make the journey by walking, without learning to remake, to retouch the dream for which we set out to walk” (Freire, 1992, p. 79). This reflection by Freire represents well the paths I have been following as an educator, because it is during the walk that I have learned to walk together with the children, and this walk strengthens and touches up the hope for a better education for the different ruralities.

Autobiographical research and life-formation narratives have been the fertile ground and basis for these elaborations.

3.3 Teaching practice in multigrade classrooms

And the child walks behind, in short, awkward steps, with his books and notebooks, his ball, his doll. They feel that serious decisions are being made above them, without their participation, which will determine their happiness or unhappiness, their punishments or rewards, and deplete their capacity to resist (Korczak, 1986, p. 23).

Carrying out research *with* children and not on them requires a change in attitude as a researcher; breaking away from the old and dominant paradigm that children are only or mainly at school to learn from adults. This is an experience that I am, initially, daring to try.

In the text *Narrativas de crianças sobre suas experiências na escola* (Children's narratives about their experiences at school), Luciane de Conti (2018) delicately and clearly presents her start in narrative research with children in 2011, highlighting invitations from teachers Maria da Conceição Passeggi and Martine Lani-Bayle, who collectively began their immersion in children's narratives about their experiences at school. In this sense, she says that the research proposal proved to be, and still is, challenging, as it requires “ruptures in our ways of thinking, of organizing our investigative paths, of analyzing our ‘data’, of being and being as researchers...” (De Conti, 2018, p. 697).

According to De Conti (2018, p. 697), it was necessary to move on from researching the child - “and everything that follows from this stance, such as interpreting for the child, speaking for the child, reflecting for the child - to researching with the child” (De Conti, 2018, p. 697). We understand that the attitude of researching with children is a complex experience, given our initial and continuing training and work, which is sometimes anchored in a positivist and hierarchical structure of knowledge.

An important and instigating reflection raised by the author is to think about how the experience is configured from the child's feeling and gaze, bearing in mind that in childhood “the time of living (instant of seeing) is so intense - [...] everything is ‘new’ to them - that the articulation between this time and the time of experience (time to elaborate and understand) can be ‘short’” (De Conti, 2018, p. 701). However, although “short”, children's narratives bring maximum extensions of life.

The experiences we're going to narrate about the school space were lived in the school where I've been working since the beginning of my teaching career, in 2015. The institution is part of the municipal education network in the city of Mossoró/RN, located in the countryside, more specifically in the Cordão de Sombra II settlement, serving children from four different communities, from kindergarten to 5th grade.

The children help us to constantly rethink our work, showing us how they learn and how they don't. They are very rich in their words, experiences and ways of seeing the world and school.

In this sense, we can say that our experiences with children in multigroup classes have been extremely challenging, and these challenges have multiplied during the Covid-19 pandemic and when we returned to face-to-face classes (Rodrigues, 2021). During the remote classes, I heard phrases directed at me and the children such as:

“the good activity is the one copied on the board/in the notebook”; ‘erase this, it's all wrong’; ‘you don't know how to do it [write]’. Situations in which the child cried during the lesson because the adult helping him didn't let him do the activity without correcting him all the time. The solutions I keep finding are based on my experiences (Rodrigues, 2021, p. 8).

We understand children as complex beings who create strategies to deal with situations. They reflect on the importance of what they study and experience at home and at school. According to Furlanetto, Passeggi and Biasoli (2020, p. 58) “from the children's point of view, well-being does not always coincide with the interpretation given to it by the adult who organizes teaching practices, spaces and times at school”.

That's why we try to listen to them sensitively, to understand the context in which they live, as well as their families; so that they realize that they are part of an environment in which their words and anxieties are heard and considered and that school is not separate from life.

Among the anxieties experienced with online classes, I also heard from children who were very shy or resistant to taking part in classes: “What a good class, teacher!” “I like this school and studying”; “When I finish here [written activity], I'm going to play, see! There's playtime!” - telling parents and guardians. Working from this perspective is no easy task; it is a constant remaking of oneself with the other (Rodrigues, 2021, p. 8).

Reflecting a little on the importance of play and the children's constant demands, as shown in the statement “When I finish here [writing activity] I'm going to play, you see! There's playtime!”. Passeggi *et al.* (2018) discuss the world of school and the trajectory of “erasure” that reverberates through this institution. According to the authors, research carried out in France with people aged between 40 and 80 shows how schooling - with its pleasant and traumatizing aspects - is about to resurface at any age. So that, by accessing their childhood memories, each schooled adult “can see [...] the unique memories of their school career have been transformed into relics” (Passeggi *et al.*, 2018, p. 60).

It's as if, as we grow up, we fit into a fixed student profile. What is paradoxical, however, according to the authors, is that despite studies and research confirming the importance of play for children, we know how increasingly rare moments of playfulness are becoming at school.

We agree with the authors when we look at the reality we experience in our multi-grade classes. Play and playfulness in the kindergarten class, with children aged 4 and 5, are constant practices; however, when these children turn 6 and join the 1st/2nd/3rd grade

multigrade class, they need to mature more quickly and keep up with the routine of older children (aged 7 and 8), where play is timed in the school curriculum. The urgency of becoming literate as quickly as possible takes precedence over children's other learning needs and rights. The scenario of the return to classroom lessons in the municipality of Mossoró/RN has been marked by an increase in the children's workload in schools, aimed at a learning recovery program, which in elementary school focuses on literacy in Portuguese and Mathematics.

In this case, the municipal authorities sometimes forget that children are also tired and affected by the pandemic and post-pandemic and need less demands for the “right time to learn”, and more quality time, adequate space and support, playfulness, and interaction at school with peers and teachers, to continue expressing themselves and growing.

In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1987) had already told us that “no one educates anyone, no one educates themselves, men educate each other, mediated by the world”. (Freire, 1987, p. 44). In this way, the author pointed out that authentic education does not happen from “A” to “B” or from “A” to “B”, but from “A” to “B”, mediated by the world. Although Freire has been reflecting on these issues since the 1980s, we are still faced with a constant struggle against the standardization of education, curricula and actions in school spaces. Students, educators and the school community are hardly listened to in the face of so many reforms to which Brazilian public schools are subjected.

4 Conclusions

In view of the discussions undertaken during this text, I think it is interesting to reflect and reiterate, in this space, on the self-(trans)forming power of biographical approaches in education (Passeggi, 2021) and in the different times we live in (Hess, 2004).

In this sense, narrative reflexivity offers the person who narrates the possibility of making sense of what they didn't have before and, consequently, reconstructing another version of themselves and their education, a version that is provisional. Narrating one's

own experiences and learning from the history of other people's experiences are part of our humanity. Depriving ourselves of the narrative of the self deprives us of our humanity (Passeggi, 2021).

Passeggi's (2021) reflections help me to think about and better understand the reflections I have been making about the construction and archiving of myself, in this text and in previous texts. The author points out, based on Pineau and Le Grand *apud* Passeggi (2021, p. 95), that “a crisis is necessary so that the subject can abandon this heritage and have the courage to begin, not only to give voice to the ‘I’, but also to reflect, making it work, select and conjugate, in the first person, the words and moments inherited”. It was from an existential and epistemological crisis experienced during my master's degree in education that I began to take charge of my life and started to decide on the paths I would follow professionally, in my personal, love and religious life. I decided, for example, to change my line of research and approach; to get rid of beliefs that, like tight clothes, no longer fit; and to open myself up to new experiences and challenges.

These experiences are close to the experience recounted by Hess (2004) about how his desire to be a painter was repressed during his youth because his father believed that such a career would not provide him with sufficient conditions for his personal livelihood. Hess wonders why he forbade himself to do what he loved to do, even after his parents' death. “Having had a job for 30 years, how can I live according to an organization of daily life marked by injunctions whose very foundations no longer exist? It is the routine of life that makes us reproduce inherited behaviors even though the justifications that gave rise to them no longer exist” (Hess, 2004, p. 30).

To become an autonomous personality, a subject of oneself, according to Hess's experience, is to recognize this inheritance, “accepting some of its components, but also determining instituting ruptures. We need to be able to reject certain moments inherited from our parents, from our environment of origin, from our culture; and to create new moments” (Hess, 2004, p. 34). Just like Hess (2004), in his experience with painting we need to refuse certain moments inherited from our parents, our environment of origin or culture in order to be able to create new moments, and authorize ourselves for life.

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15

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