
Identity Construction through Schooling: listening to students' voices

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ABSTRACT One of the main problems faced by several educational systems around the world is educational exclusion. Portugal is no exception. It is recognized that those who drop out of education are at risk of social exclusion, with reduced opportunities to participate in society. In order to understand this, the authors reconceptualized the school as a community of practice, where students not only appropriate academic knowledge, but also new ways of being and perceiving themselves and others, and school practice itself. This article aims to better understand educational exclusion from the perspective of at-risk students. How do their constructed positional identities originate ways of being, relating and acting in relation to school agents and practices? The authors developed four focus group interviews with students presenting high rates of truancy and failure. Against their expectations, several students showed intent of pursuing their own path within the school system and saw themselves as capable of changing the conditions of failure in order to succeed in school.

In the twentieth century, Western societies underwent huge economic, political, social and cultural changes that have created new demands for traditional schooling. Human values, centred on dignifying human life and focused on the development of equitable opportunities for all and the construction of fairer and more cohesive societies, have been outlined in several international documents (United Nations, 1989; European Council, 2006b, 2007). Education as a fundamental right is now seen as a way to help in the construction of a better, more prosperous and tolerant world, and also as a tool to promote personal and social development (UNESCO, 1994, 2003).

Despite education's increased political worth, many individuals are still denied it, as they are kept apart from the regular educational system or cannot succeed in completing their education (UNESCO, 2000, 2003; European Council, 2006b, 2007). These individuals are not only being denied a fundamental right, but are also being positioned in an at-risk situation with regard to social exclusion and marginalization (UNESCO, 2000; European Council, 2006b, 2007). Indeed, we live in an increasingly complex world, so school has to provide students with tools for dealing with its complexity, unpredictability and constant change (Ministry of Education, 2003; Head, 2004; Perret-Clermont, 2004; European Council, 2006a; Galvão et al, 2006). Those students who do not succeed in appropriating complex competencies will have difficulties with participating in society and with exercising their rights as citizens in a conscientious and responsible way (European Council, 2006a; Galvão et al, 2006).

Despite the Portuguese government's efforts at increasing the literacy levels of its school population, Portugal still faces serious problems with truancy, failure and dropouts (Ministry of Education, 2006). In 2004/05, the school failure (retention) rate in the ninth level (the last year of compulsory schooling) was still 20.3% and the rate for secondary schools was 32.1% (Ministry of Education, 2006). In addition, the school dropout rate was nearly 40%. Those students from less

favourable geographical, social and cultural backgrounds are the most vulnerable and present higher school failure and dropout rates (Ministry of Education, 2006).

It is therefore essential to understand educational failure and dropping out from the perspective of students from less favourable familiar, social and cultural communities. With this study, we aim to establish how students who are at risk of educational exclusion construct their own identities, by considering their interpretations of themselves, of others and of school, and how these identities originate ways of being, relating and acting with other school agents and school practices, and influence their decisions concerning school and education.

Theoretical Framework

A sociocultural perspective, focusing on the dynamic interaction between external and internal aspects of the human being, seems a good starting point for studying this problem. By considering the school (or classroom) as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), and identity as arising from the position each individual occupies in a community and from the constant interplay between individuals and their construction of their own and others' positions (Holland et al, 1998; Gee, 2000; Hand, 2006), we intend to enlarge the perspective from which to look at educational exclusion.

A community of practice is a group of persons related and connected in a culturally shared activity, who recognize that connection and relations are essential for them to perform the shared activity and who, by their own participation within the community, appropriate knowledge, values, artefacts, ways of being, behaving and relating with each other which are essential for performing the activity (Wenger, 1998). According to Holland et al (1998), becoming a member of a community means becoming embodied in a certain figured world, which is a world formed by characters and agents who occupy certain positions and position each other in a social space, who relate and interact with each other, and whose relations and behaviours are constrained by shared meanings and values. As such, these figured worlds are important resources not only for each individual to interpret his/her own practice and others' practices, but also to guide his/her own participation within the community. So, by processes of participation and reification, individuals negotiate meanings about their experience in that particular context and about who they are in that community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

By reconceptualizing the school (and classroom) as a community of practice, we are assuming that learning is a process of becoming someone within a community, in relation to others and to shared practice (Wenger, 1998). To begin with, newcomers are peripheral participants. But, progressively, by appropriating the symbolic and material resources of the community, they become full participants in the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). According to this perspective, students not only appropriate academic knowledge (related to subject content), but also develop new ways of being and of perceiving themselves and others (Gutierrez et al, 1995; Nasir, 2002; Hand, 2006; Langer-Osuna, 2007; Solomon, 2007). Indeed, by learning subject content, the student is simultaneously positioning him/herself and others within the social space of the school/classroom and learning who he/she is as a student (for instance, 'I am a good student' or 'I don't belong here'). Social positions influence the student's own identity as well as ways of acting, being and relating to others, to school and to classroom practices, affecting the way the student will engage (or not) with school and school knowledge (Gutierrez et al, 1995; Langer-Osuna, 2007; Solomon, 2007).

The school (or classroom) is a social space occupied by different social agents who are embodied in a certain figured world that guides their behaviours and their interpretations. These social agents have different positions, status and power which shape each other and influence how each individual sees himself/herself, how he/she sees others and how he/she thinks others see him/her (Holland et al, 1998; Archer et al, 2007). Furthermore, there are many rules, norms and values (shared by the dominant society) that authorize the school to place students and teachers in certain positions, with certain responsibilities and duties, and with certain ways of acting, behaving, interacting and interpreting the social context (Gutierrez et al, 1995; Gee, 2000).

Students belong to different communities and to different cultural contexts, each with its specific figured world. Those who belong to literate social groups, whose figured worlds are an

extension of the school's figured world, have 'practices of learning, behaving and talking that accompany school culture and legitimate it for themselves, creating identification with it' (Moreira, 2007, p. 2). However, for many students, school and their own original social group form two different communities, with distinct, most often unbridgeable figured worlds, which makes it difficult for the students to interpret and participate in school/classroom practices and to negotiate their own identities and meanings about their own experience at school.

Methodology

Study Context and Participants

The study presented here is part of a broader project whose goals are, among others, to listen to the voices of students who are at risk of educational exclusion or who have already dropped out of school in order to understand how they construct their own identities, by considering their interpretations of themselves, of others and of school, and how these identities originate ways of being, relating and acting with other school agents and school practices, and influence their decisions with regard to themselves, school and education. The present study focuses in particular on a group of students from a class that was seen as problematic by a school, where most students had discipline problems and the teachers complained a lot about them.

Data was collected in one urban school that presents high truancy, failure and dropout rates. The participants were 20 students from a basic school (eighth level), whose parents (or institution where they lived) agreed for them to participate in the study. They were boys and girls of different ages, ranging from 13 to 18, and many of them had a history of school truancy and failure. Many of the students presented difficult life situations (for example, related to problems with the law or their parents having problems with the law or students who lived in institutions and not with their parents). Many came from foreign countries – one of them was from an eastern European country, whose first language was not Portuguese, and others were from former Portuguese colonies.

In order to get in touch with the students, one teacher was involved in the research. She explained the goals of the study to her students (and to the other teachers at the school) and asked for permission from the students' parents for them to participate in the study. One researcher from the project carried out the interviews away from the classroom.

Data Collection

A focus group interview (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1998) was carried out, the goal of which was to find out about the students' experiences in a school where they were labelled as problematic and to understand how they construct meaning about their experiences. Four focus group interviews were carried out with groups of five or six students. One of the researchers from the team carried out one interview each week. During the interviews, the students were taken out of their class (known as the 'project area') with the permission of the responsible teacher. In addition, the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analyses

According to an interpretative approach (Erickson, 1986), we used a method of content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to study the type and quality of the answers and arguments presented. It was an iterative process of reading and rereading the data so as to assign meaningful pieces of text to categories based on our theoretical questions. Exploring repeatedly these categories and the connections between them allowed us to acknowledge the complexities of the students' positions and identities and their relation to school experiences and future projects. The categories of analysis considered in this article are: (1) processes of reification, (2) experiences of (non-) participation and (3) forms of engagement with the school.

Results

The goal of the study is to understand how at-risk students construct their identities and how those identities impact on their decisions concerning school and education. The presentation of the results is organized according to the categories used for analysis.

Processes of Reification

Students have the perception that teachers regard them as the bad students, the students who misbehave, those who do not want to learn and are not interested in school and school knowledge, and also those who might exert a negative influence on other students. These were the definitions that the researchers were presented with when the research started and they correspond to how the students think the teachers perceive them, as can be observed in the examples presented below:

One teacher told me that I would be nobody.

'Oh, look at you. You are 16 years old. You do not know anything.' They think that we do not know anything, that we are immature. They undervalue youngsters. By 16 years old you can know whatever you want. You don't have to be 40.

They [the teachers] separated us (Me, M. and E.) from C. They think that we are a bad influence on her. I say: 'We were all together and I ended the school year with success ... Why am I a bad influence if I even had school success? You see?'

I failed some years ago. People from school told my mother that I failed because I was wandering around with peers that were considered a bad influence. But that was not true! ... How is this possible? People who don't really know me say: it is a question of exercising bad influence on her peers. If I am a bad influence, so let me be. The important thing is my mother. And she tells me: 'I trust you; I know that your friends are not a bad influence.'

Being reified as the bad students legitimizes the emergence of some ideas about themselves related to school performance and determines forms of interpreting some of their behaviours. For instance, these students fail in school not because they have learning difficulties, but because they have no interest in school – when they put their hand up in class, for example, they just want to destabilize the class and not ask a question. In addition, by being placed in this position (as the bad students), some actions and forms of relationships are legitimized within the school and the classroom; for instance, being isolated from other students, reducing interactions as a way to control behaviour, devaluing in order to motivate, as is shown in the following examples:

Teachers do not stimulate and they devalue students. They think that by doing this, students will be willing to study.

Teachers could stimulate more. They should pay more attention to those students who have difficulties.

She [the teacher] is always saying: 'You have failed. You should know!' But it is not like that, 'cause I missed classes ... That doesn't work.

There are no teachers who say: 'Very well. I know that you have failed, but you were able to do it this time. Go on like that.' No. Teachers ... arrive: 'Here you have (the test classification). You only did what you are expected to do.'

Those who failed [in the test], stood there, doing nothing, listening [while teacher was correcting the test].

Teaching, that? When one of us doesn't understand something, the teacher says: 'It is your problem.'

These reified positions determine modes of (non-)participation. Indeed, the school and classroom context do not allow students to live meaningful experiences, not even to negotiate meaning with the teachers, and can place some students in unfavourable positions.

Experiences of (Non-)Participation

Students report constant experiences of non-participation, as they do not get involved with school and classroom experiences and with most teachers in a meaningful way. As can be observed in the examples presented below, many students describe their experience in school, as well as the curriculum subjects, as meaningless and useless:

I think that schools should be better. They should not focus exclusively on school subjects. They should talk about other things that are equally important. I think that those things are more important for our future, so that we know how to act, than school subjects. School subjects will help in our work, but not in daily situations ... School subjects are important for work, but not for life.

Some school subjects work only for occupying our free time.

There are some school subjects that, maybe, won't be of any use in our future.

In addition to their sense that school and the curriculum subjects are of no use in helping them deal with their current life, they also doubt their instrumental value (as a way to help them succeed in life), as they present a devalued vision of school diplomas:

Many students are unwilling to study because they know that when school is over they won't have a place to work. They won't be able to work where they would like to.

There are many persons who have university studies but who are unemployed.

Studying for 20 or 22 years, and then not finding a job.

What is the purpose of all this? Why do I come here? Why is school important? Why should I engage with school? This sense of meaninglessness seems to emerge from the reduced possibility the students have to negotiate meaning about school and the school experience. Indeed, their participation is limited as, on the one hand, it is the teachers who define how a student should behave, what learning is and what relevant knowledge is, and, on the other hand, as students feel that they are gradually being left out and that interaction with most teachers is reduced, as can be observed in the following examples:

Teachers arrive, dump the school subject and then leave. They do not care if we like the lessons or not. 'What do you think?' No, they just dump the school subject.

The mathematics teacher started talking about my grandparents. But I could not say a word or she would say that I was misbehaving ... We have to accept everything, but there are things that are hard to accept.

On Friday, we were correcting a test ... I was late. Teacher gave me back my test and I said ... They were correcting the first question that I had got correct. Then I said: 'Teacher, can I say the answer?' We were correcting. She didn't pay me any attention ... She despised me. I told myself: 'Have a good time, teacher. Have a good time.'

They [the teachers] rather ask those students who they like more ... The others are left out.

I failed because I had been in hospital for some days ... I didn't have anybody to bring a sick note to school. When I got back, the teacher told me that I had failed ... He is one of those teachers who does not care. He didn't do anything. He didn't show my sick note in the class teachers' meeting ... I was not able to bring my sick note. I was in bed. I could not stand. I didn't have anyone to bring my sick note. My mother works as she has to raise us ... I didn't have anybody to bring my sick note.

In addition, any action taken that falls outside a teacher's definition of appropriate action is interpreted as misbehaviour and legitimizes certain actions from the teacher. As a result, students have to comply with those definitions ('We have to accept everything, but there are things that are hard to accept'), although they do not accept the positions they have been placed in.

The students do not easily accept the positions imposed upon them (of bad students, of students who do not want to learn, of students who are not able to learn), but their limited possibility of participation reduces their possibility of negotiating and of changing them.

Forms of Engagement with School

Facing these constant experiences of non-participation and the unfavourable positions they occupy within the social space of the school, students develop two forms of engagement with the school. Some of the students disengage from the school and devalue it; however, others develop creative modes of engagement (Wenger, 1998).

As can be observed in the examples presented below, many students develop negative images of school and disengage affectively and physically from it:

I failed because I disengaged from school. I am responsible for it.

I don't like school. And then, I used to leave home and then everyone was there, in the neighbourhood. Why should I go to school?

I don't need to study to be rich.

There are plenty of people who have university studies and don't have a job.

School is a waste of time.

It seems that everything is spoilt.

This school is spoilt and falling apart. It is bad.

The school's size is almost the same as the size of my home. It is really small.

By devaluing school and the curriculum subjects, students are protecting the unfavourable identities imposed upon them (for instance, 'I am a bad student, but that does not matter as school is useless' or 'I am a bad student, but I excel in other areas outside school'). Also, by devaluing school, students make their disengagement easier, which frees them to invest in other communities where they can negotiate other meanings as to who they are and about their life experiences.

However, as can be observed in the examples presented below, other students develop forms of engagement based on imagination (Wenger, 1998):

People think that failing is boring. But, for me, it is not boring. I failed, not because I was here all year round and I didn't learn. I failed because I missed classes, because I was feeling bad. So, I didn't notice the school subjects. For me, there are many subjects that are new. I didn't notice those last year.

People think that those who fail have failed because they did not know. Not knowing is not the case. It is ... or one forgets school or one wants to play. It is not because one doesn't know. No one is stupid in this world. One just didn't make any effort.

OK. When I have bad marks, I become sad. But I think, 'Let's see, my class peers had good marks, why should I not also be able to?'

I always told myself that I will make it ... And I will. If one person thinks that he can, he certainly can.

I already had plenty of time to play, too. Now, I have to study to become someone in life.

I failed because of me. It was nobody else's responsibility. But I will make it. I know that I will make it. Why should I give up? I have to keep on fighting ... That's life.

By using creative processes (Wenger, 1998), these students have built in their private spaces images of themselves projected in the future, which become constitutive of their own identities. They are no longer the bad students or the ones who exert negative influences over others, but the students who didn't want to study in a certain moment of their lives. They are the students who are able to have success if they want to study, as they have as many capabilities as any other students. This process allows them to give a different meaning to their experience in school, which allows them to deal with the unfavourable situation they occupy in it.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, the school and the classroom are assumed to be a group of people engaged in a shared activity and in negotiating meaning about the activity, about the actions they develop and the relationships they sustain in order to pursue it. Meaning negotiation involves processes of participation and of reification (Wenger, 1998). By participating in school practice, school agents are developing actions and relationships with others that facilitate the appropriation of competencies, knowledge, artefacts and reifications that allow them to interpret school experience (Wenger, 1998). But by developing actions and relationships with others, school agents are also being reified in positions within the school (Holland et al, 1998). Each school agent is placed in a position and each position is projected with certain power, status, rights and legitimacy to develop certain actions, relationships and expectancies (Holland et al, 1998). So, a position provides the school agent with a perspective to look at the social world (school) and it also facilitates access to certain symbolical resources, the development of modes of participation and the emergence of meanings and the ability to negotiate it.

To reconceptualize the school or the classroom as a community of practice is important in order to understand how students construct meaning about their own experience at school and about themselves as students. By negotiating meaning about their own experience at school, students are also negotiating an identity in the school community (Who is he/she in that community? What can others expect from her/him? What can he/she expect from others?). Students not only negotiate meaning by the way in which they live their experiences in participating in the school community, but also by the way they reify others and are reified by others.

The data shows that students were reified in unfavourable positions (with which they did not agree) which legitimate certain actions that limit their possibility of participating in the process of negotiating meaning. By having a limited participation, it is difficult for these students to negotiate meaning about their experience at school and about who they are in the school community. In order to deal with this unfavourable situation and maintain their psychological well-being, some students started processes of disengagement and devaluing the school and school knowledge, and started to look for other contexts that facilitated the construction of a sense and a purpose for their own experiences. For these students, dropping out and truancy are strategies that allow them to participate in other communities and to renegotiate their own identities. However, other students facing the same unfavourable situation developed different forms of engagement based on imagination (Wenger, 1998). They constructed images about themselves and their future (for instance, 'I will be rich' or 'I am going to be someone in life') that allow them to give a different meaning to their experiences of non-participation within the school. This creative process allows for the creation of other realities where they are able to negotiate meaning about their experience and about themselves (for instance, 'I didn't fail because I am stupid, but because I didn't want to study' or 'The moment I decide to study I will succeed just like any other student').

So, in the face of similar experiences of (non-)participation, students develop different forms of engagement with the school and school knowledge. Some of them, through this creative process, are able to interpret their experience at school in a radically different way from others students who disengage from school and invest in other communities. These different forms of engagement raise other questions: How do students come to develop different forms of

engagement with school? How do these different forms of engagement impact on their decisions concerning school and education?

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