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Understanding the Frame of Reference Through Educational Biography

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to present findings from a qualitative research, which aimed to explore exclusion themes in the lives of adult learners who are characterized as “school dropouts”. Our intention is to contribute to the discussion about the suitability of research methods and techniques that could be applied in order to develop a better understanding of the reasons that lead young men and women to leave school early in their lives. Our project involved the implementation of a series of biographical interviews with graduates from a School of Second Chance in Larissa, Greece. In this paper, we discuss the themes that emerged in the research material of a male and a female interviewee, which according to their narration and our perception may be considered as biographical barriers that excluded our research participants from formal education. Additionally, based on these themes and the participants’ narration we argue about the reasons that lead them back to education through their participation in the program offered by the School of Second Chance.

Key words: adult learners, transformative learning, educational biography.

Introduction

The concept of meaning perspective is one of the central ideas which may be found in the heart of the theory of transformative learning. According to Mezirow a meaning perspective is “a habitual set of experiences that constitutes an orienting frame of reference that we use in projecting our symbolic models and that serves as a (usually tacit) belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience” (1991: 42). The aim of a learning process which is addressed to adult learners is according to Mezirow, the transformation of the frame of reference.

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Transformative learning is a rational process of revisiting and reassessing the reasons that nurture the existence of problematical meaning perspectives including those referring and signifying cultural features as class, gender, religion, ideology and others (Mezirow, 2009). But how do we identify these problematical meaning perspectives? How can we, as adult educators, understand the frame of reference of our learners?

In this paper, I am going to report results from a research endeavour that we implemented in Greece in order to comprehend the frame of reference of adult learners who participated in one of the most popular adult education institutions in our country - the Second Chance Schools (hereafter SCS). These schools offer to adult learners who have not completed compulsory education the opportunity to be awarded with the equivalent of a junior high school diploma, after the completion of a two-year curriculum. As a rather new institution in Greece, these schools have attracted the interest of researchers in the field of adult education. Researchers have inquired issues like the gap between the number of adults who have not completed compulsory education and those who participate in the SCS (Efstratoglou & Nikolopoulou, 2008), the profile of those who work as educators in these institutions (Vergidis, 2003), the educational strategies of the SCS in Greece and the EU (Anagnou & Vergidis, 2008), the profile and the views of SCS directors regarding the operation of their institutions (Anagnou, 2006; Hatzitheoharous, 2008) and the curriculum standards (Vekris & Hontolidou, 2003). Moreover, there have been studies related to the learners' expectations and their cultural capital (Vergidis, 2004; Landritsi, 2007) and the personal estimations of the students regarding their attitudes and skills towards the learning process (Sipitanou & Platsidou, 2010). However, none of these studies was ever concerned with the key concept of the frame of reference of the learners. I consider this gap in Greek adult education research as an important one, since the non-existence of such research is according to my understanding equivalent to the unawareness of the real and deeper adult learning needs.

Our study, as it was stated before was concentrated in identifying the meaning perspectives and the meaning making process of a group of adult learners. We should note that I understand making meaning as socially constructed (Jarvis, 2009). We make meaning everyday in our life as we try to understand and correspond to our social and physical environment. In this view, meaning is directly related to our conscious experience and thus our memory. And as Jarvis (2009: 75) suggests "...our memories of events are the building blocks of the meanings that we place on our lives". On the other hand, our narratives are the signifiers of our meaning schemes and in the events that we decide to include in a narrative, which relates to our biography we may locate experiences that lead

us to a certain meaning formation. Illeris is describing the above clearly supporting that “the story one has about oneself and which constantly develops and is interpreted a new, is the red thread running through life, self-understanding and learning” (2007: 62).

Methodology

To implement our research goals we developed a purposeful sample of seven adult learners who had graduated from the Second Chance School of Larissa. The members of our research group were selected based on the diversity of their social profile. Our desire was to create a very diverse group of interviewees (i.e. man, women, employed, unemployed, pensioners, housewives, young adults, etc.) in order to elicit a varied range of information. We also considered issues like their willingness and availability to participate in our research. From this group of people we asked them to tell us their life history including their learning and educational experiences (Koulaouzides, 2009). We also asked them to include their experience from their education at the SCS. After each biographical interview we transcribed and reconstructed the narration in a time line and then we returned it to each interviewee in order for them to comment on it and give us the final permission to use it for our research project. For the analysis of the narrations we used the holistic content narrative analysis as it is described by Lieblich, Mashich, & Zilber (1998). This type of analysis takes into consideration the entire narration and focuses on its content. After reading each interview several times, we decided about the special focus of content that evolved in each story from beginning to end. We distinguished the special focus by the space devoted to the theme in the text, its repetitive nature and the number of details, which were provided by the interviewee. The result of this analysis is a narrative synthesis of events, thoughts and feelings in a time line, which tries to reveal the unique development of each person. Based on the literature about the barriers and the conveniences of adult learners we identified relevant biographical themes in every biography and then we tried to create a typology of these themes. We were interested in the general attitude of the interviewees towards the crucial (meaning making) events at the time when those events were experienced but also from their present point of view. We were not looking for theoretical positions or views but for their general understanding for the events in their life (Roberts, 2002; Tsiolis, 2006). In the next section we will present parts from the reconstructed narrations of two cases from our study: Theodora, a 34-year old woman and Sampson a 48-

year old man. However, our discussion and our concluding thoughts are based on all the narrations.

The case of Theodora

Theodora works as a cleaning lady in a private school. She is the first-born child of a rural family. Her parents never finished compulsory education. However her younger sisters managed to enter tertiary education. Her husband is an army officer and they have two children. Her mother in-law is living with them on a permanent basis. She has graduated from the SCS in 2009 and she has as an aim to continue her studies in order to get a better job.

Early school life

Theodora's first experience from school was rather cruel. The first thing she remembers from school is an unexplained violent behaviour coming from her schoolteacher. This inexplicable behaviour created an irrational framework with which she identified schooling:

"I remember it as if it is happening now, when I started school there was this teacher, no he was not a teacher, he was Adolph Hitler...he is dead now... maybe he is alive, God forgive him, Mr. K.... he entered class and I was the only child in the classroom, and the desks were huge...I was a small kid, it took me a while to sit properly. And then he asked me "What is your name?" I replied "Dora" [a short version of Theodora]. "No you are not named Dora", he replied, and "What is your name?" he shouted back... I did not know what to say. Everybody in the village called me Dora. Dora was the name I knew. He was not accepting it. So he grabs me by the ear and he pulls me up so hard...and I was going back and forth and then he stopped when he realised that I was bleeding".

This situation continued. There was a clear lack of communication between our narrator and her teacher. The power and the authority of the teacher were so powerful that diminished every development opportunity of Theodora:

"Anyway I went to school but I hardly said a word ever since that incident. In the village there was no kindergarten and we were not familiar with the alphabet at all. I am not sure whether the teacher knew these facts. Wasn't he able to see that I had no foundations... that I was not able to write? Anyway I hated school...I did not want to see it. And the teacher he was not able to understand...only beating and beating..."

In high school things became more complicated. There is no help from home and even though Theodora tried hard to respond to the demands of the curriculum, this effort was not recognized. Moreover, the environment is now different:

“In high school things did not change much [regarding learning]. In some cases things went worse. Now we had a different teacher for every course and they were indifferent...I failed in four courses. In the summer I had to work in the field. I was working while other kids were studying for the remedial examinations. However, I said to my father that I wish to try again, to go back to school. He agreed. I went again in the same class for one more year. I did much better. But I failed again in two classes. That was it. I was in despair. I did not want to try again.”

In general, school is for our narrator a place related to violence and rejection. Theodora was never able to become a member of the school environment. She was never able to understand school as a place for learning. So she stepped out:

“What was this period [she means schooling]? I hardly remember anything...as if I had no childhood, no school life. But I went through it! I have a vacuum, a huge vacuum. I remember working in the fields but the learning at school is like I never lived it. Never! And I do not understand why?”

Family/social life and the SCS

In her family life Theodora was forced to take over responsibilities of an adult nature very early. This fact is described with a sense of sorrow. A sorrow for the missing childhood:

“From a very young age I had to face a lot of problems and to take over many responsibilities. I was a baby with responsibilities. I was protecting my sisters, I was doing housecleaning I always had some kind of responsibility. I was never completely free. I was helping with the animals and in the fields. So childhood was not at no cost... it was with a lot of responsibilities and a lot of trouble”

Moreover, in her house there is a reproduction of the feeling of rejection that Theodora was receiving at school, especially regarding the issue of learning. She was not encouraged to participate in education. On the contrary she was always considered a bright kid when work was the issue:

“The truth is that I was always called a “dummy” at home. This was almost the motto of our house. I was getting reward for things I was doing, because I was a good girl, because I was helping at home or in the fields. There I was the bright

kid. But when it was about school and learning I was a “dummy”, so I was leaving school behind and I was doing everything else”.

Another issue that facilitated Theodora’s exclusion from education was the ethics of the small community she was living. The small village community had no education plans for the girls. If they were not good in school, a good wedding was the next best thing:

“[After failing school] they kept me one year at home but I was on fire. To sit in the village at home? To do what? My mother’s perspective was to find a husband for me. And thus, the search for a husband started when I was only 13. It was impossible for me to think that I will stay at home waiting for my wedding...at some point I told my parents that I could go back to school, to the evening school...the day schools were not accepting me...but my father rejected the idea. He considered evening schools, institutions for bums. He said that I had lost my chance...now I had to do something else...to start a family. That was right for them”.

Theodora, always felt that her exclusion from the educational system was a social stigma. As an adult it was very hard for her to accept it. And she was trying to hide it from her social milieu. Things start to change when she gets married. Within her marriage she finds the courage to accept her “problem” and makes a first step, she reveals her secret to her husband:

“I met my husband when I was 19; we were together for a long time. I never told him that I was a drop out. And from that point on I completely forgot about it and the idea to go back to school. He was never going to believe it. Anyway, we got engaged, married and we had children. Everything was fine. And one night as we were sitting at the couch I told him “Listen I have to tell you something, I never finished high school...I went by I dropped out”...”

But beyond her expectations she finds in the face of her husband a supporter of her dream:

“My husband was my supporter he said to me “I will take care of the kids, I will take over the house...” And he also found an excuse for his mother, my mother in-law. “We will tell that you are having a second job, an afternoon job!”...That was all my husband’s ideas...it was his support for me...My mother in law never found out that I was going to school in the afternoons. But I also had to lose some of the SCS field trips, in order to keep it a secret”

A short summary for Theodora’s story

In Theodora’s narration we are able to trace many events that we see as biographical themes, which led her to be excluded from education. The authoritative el-

elementary school teacher, the family responsibilities and her rejection as a learner from her family created a vicious cycle that created barriers for her participation in the educational system. On the other hand the community values and the stereotypes related to the position of a woman in society were leading her towards the role of the wife and the mother, two social functions that needed no formal education. Theodora describes with great pain her effort to hide her stigma as a drop out. Moreover, there is a sense of sorrow emerging from her narration regarding the lost childhood. As an adult she continued to face some of the social barriers. It is very interesting that she and her husband conspired against the mother-in-law in order for Theodora to attend the Second Chance School.

The case of Sampson

Sampson is 48 years old and he is single. For many years, he worked as musician in nightclubs and concerts. For the past few years he works part-time as a musician and he is teaching music in conservatoires and a musical school. He is the youngest child of a suburban family of five. His father was a taxi driver and his mother worked as a farmer and a cleaning lady.

Early school life

Sampson describes his early school years as difficult for him, almost hateful. He experienced beating, differentiation in classroom and bullying. Sampson believes that this situation reflected the general political and social conditions of Greece in those years (the years of the military dictatorship). He often indicates the inequality, the oppression from the older and stronger kids, as an impediment for any kind of educational achievement. He conceives learning and knowledge as the tools of imposition by the power and not as tools of personal development:

“Well, at elementary school I had hard years, dictatorship... and in our family, we had persons who were leftists, nationalists, we had them all. Bad experience. There was a lot of harassment. Well, of course, I was wild as a child like all children. I hated school because I could not confront the elder boys or teachers, so I developed repulsion for learning and knowledge. I ignored it completely”.

In high school years the situation was pretty much the same. Although he went to a private school, violence and imposition of authority by the teachers were a generalised behaviour at that time. Moreover, he didn't like the technical education, which was the obvious professional choice for the boys then. Finally he dropped out of school:

“Well anyway, I finished the public elementary school and afterwards they [he means his parents] enrolled me in [he mentions the name of a private technical school for electricians] ...I went there but I didn't like it. I had an unlucky incident with a professor there too...beating again.”

Much later in the narrative, at the point which he says that he was reading literature alone without a teacher's guidance as a young man, he remembered that there were some good teachers in his life, who “gave him courage”. This phrase implies his despair as a child for the cruelty of the school environment. It seems that the presence of a brutal teacher is much powerful than the presence of “good teachers”.

“I turn-back, difficult situations, I worked in Thessaloniki, in Crete... There, in Crete I bought Kazantzakis's books and Cavafi's poems... well, I wrote my thoughts always in a paper... that I had learned at least. Well, I remember, I will make a parenthesis here, a school teacher I had in the elementary school, someone.... what was her name, I do not remember now...She was very good and I remember another teacher too, when I changed school, Mr. L., who was very good, she behaved very well and gave me courage. Those are the ones who I remember from my childhood, from the school adventure I had..”

Family/social life and the SCS

The first years of his life were carefree, full of easiness. Very quickly, however, he realizes the financial difficulties of his family. His family believes that music is an occupation only for the rich. Their reality is a continuous struggle for daily life. His father tries to bring him to this reality. His father does not satisfy his desire to learn piano – a higher class musical instrument - but in return he gets him a bouzouki (A Greek stringed instrument having a long fretted neck and usually pear-shaped body), a working-class instrument:

“Well, that was over, I certainly wanted to become a musician since childhood, and I did it. I did it, in this area. When I was younger I wanted piano. But when I told my father that I want to learn piano, he replied: “who do you think you are? Embiricos' son [A well-known Greek family of ship-owners]?” So that was gone. However, they bought me a bouzouki.”

In fact, he describes a very good relationship with their parents, a relationship of mutual love and care, although he mentions not many details. Then he says that many of the crucial decisions he made in his life were taken by giving priority to this relationship:

“But I had my mind here at my parents; I wanted to take care of them, as it was normal. Well, actually when I came back it was very difficult.”

He enrolls in SCS when he realizes that, at that point in his life, his musical talent is no longer sufficient to handle reality. He experiences a biographical disjuncture. He is confronted with the racism of the literate high school graduates over the illiterate elementary graduates. His grammatical shortcoming was becoming an obstacle standing high in his everyday life:

“I needed to do something with some papers at the tax office... my mother had a serious heart problem. I went to the tax officer with a paper, and by then I had not realize the deficiencies in my knowledge of grammar because I never needed them. And some lady there asks me to sign an official document. She said ‘sign here’. Well, I signed. I do not remember what was the case, something with my father, etc. and my mother should have been with me but my mother was sick and I was alone, so just after I signed the lady says to me : “You illiterate, you ignorant, don’t you know that you can’t sign a public document” .. There was a bit of a fuss there and I was very pissed off by this thing. Well, after that I see in the newspaper, I mean, a girl-friend of mine showed me in the newspaper that a Second Chance School, the SCS, was founded in Larissa... And God bless her anyway, this was an opportunity and an impetus for me to sit on the school bench again. After I saw that I said to myself that I should do it! I gathered all the documentation that was needed; I passed the interview and sat down! I managed to behind a desk...”

This sense of cognitive deficiency existed throughout all his life. But he didn’t consider that as his liability or an obstacle in his personal life. He correlates this deficiency with the low educational level of his father and the economic situation of the family. He says that he decided to do something about it when he was forced by the circumstances:

“There were always [moments that he felt ignorant] because my father did not know too. He wasn’t literate. He hadn’t, my father had not even finished primary school. And I also could not even fill an application. Later, when we started to have problems I wanted to make a written formal request and I didn’t know how to fill a simple application form.”

Later on he describes how he realized the knowledge deficit during his SCS studies. One of the things that he seems to comprehend also is the internal vacuum that is created in a person when he or she becomes conscious of what it really means to be illiterate:

“As time passed, the more I discovered the vacuum I had. A very large vacuum indeed.... That is why I was depressed. Certainly, by living in the children’s innocence and naiveté, you can not know and understand that knowledge is power for a man.”

A short summary for Sampson's story

Sampson, during early school years, had an intense experience of social differentiation and imposition of power. This weakness he felt as a child, to handle teacher's authority as well as the classification of the students into categories like poor – rich, bright – dumb, strong – weak, lead him to reject school early. His music talent and his devotion to music helped him to earn his life nevertheless it wasn't enough to balance the cognitive deficiencies he had due to his early decision to drop out. His family, although a loving one, fostered him with the idea that education is a luxury and it is not appropriate for their social class. All of the above made him to feel socially weak and therefore faintly depressed. The SCS was for him some kind of social compensation for the lack of opportunities he had when he was a child.

Findings - discussion

In the presented narrations as well as in the rest of the biographies of the group that we researched there were some parallel biographical trajectories (Roberts, 2002; Koulaouzides, 2009) and some. These were:

None of the families of the narrators had what is known as a “cultural capital” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) especially as far as schooling is concerned. In the best case, their parents had completed primary school while most of them had attended only a couple of years.

The social environments, in which their stories evolve, are rural or semi-urban. In all of these communities we understood the existence of a small closed society which reproduces itself and its values (Petmezidou-Tsoulouvi, 1987).

In most cases, the narrators experienced economic difficulties during their childhood. In the cases where a description of “child life without financial problems” exists, this was the result of the migration of parents to another place, with all the resulted consequences due to this family separation (Lampard, 1995).

In almost all of the narrations apart from one, the participants reported the loss of their childhood as a sore loss. As a result of this loss, in the Second Chance Schools it seems that they sought to regain that lost childhood, up to a certain extent.

In their narratives, the role of school as a space of functional socialization seems more important than as space where knowledge can be provided (Parsons, 1985).

The Second Chance School was reported as a positive learning experience.

From the individual analysis of each biography, the family and social environment seems to reproduce the basic concept that education is “children’s business” while the “adults” should have more important and productive things to do. This meaning-making concept in these specific environments is vital, as it signifies that there is no economic possibility of a prolonged adolescence for minors. In these stories the emancipation of the minors seems to occur almost hastily under this pressure, often without taking into account the emotional or even their physical maturity. We also noticed that those activities that were conceived as acceptable were linked with the social understanding for the role of the gender. The priority for the women seems to be the role of mother and wife while the priority for the men seems to be the acquisition of economic independence.

This fundamental concept that „education is for children”, seems to be the main exclusion meaning making concept in the life of our research group. Moreover, the same concept is working as a participation impediment. Another exclusion theme is situated in the negative early school experiences. The school rejection, the violence as the result of the authority of the teacher and the experience of indifference seem to interact with low self-esteem, at least in cognitive issues, and with abdication.

The experience of the Second Chance School was undoubtedly positive for all the narrators. Their interpretation of this experience appears to be related to the incentives they had in order to attend this school. According to their biographies, a key motivation for them to attend a school such as SCS, was to restore the injustice they suffered in their childhood. The dropout of school seems to be related to the lost-childhood, which follows them as a significant loss even in adulthood. This incentive is often accompanied by a more “adult” incentive (e.g. the acquisition of a high school diploma as a formal qualification for a better career).

However, the later does not seem as a substantial incentive as the return for the “injustice” in childhood. The issue of the return of this injustice through the SCS appears in almost all the biographies. Moreover, narrators sometimes acknowledge SCS as a mean to acquire social recognition, sometimes as a way to reconstruct self-esteem and in some cases as an experience of a more democratic educational structure compared with their earlier school experiences.

Concluding remarks

This study presented evidence that the school dropouts of our group seem to perceive education as an engagement that goes with either childhood or with a

higher social class. They also understand participation in education as a matter of personal responsibility, as an individual decision. This leads them to experience the social phenomenon of dropout from school as a personal disability. Both sexes have similar constraints for learning. However, these constraints are related to the role of gender, which is imposed by the social environment. The main motivation for participating in programs such as SCS, for our research group, is to balance the social injustice that they suffered in their early childhood. The external incentives (high school diploma, accreditation, etc) do not seem to be very significant for them. The experience of the SCS was considered positive and constructive by all narrators mainly because it responded to their expectations for social justice despite the fact that they also obtained some formal qualifications.

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Razumevanje referentnog okvira kroz obrazovne biografije

Apstrakt: Svrha ovog rada je prezentovanje nalaza kvalitativnog istraživanja čiji je cilj bio da ispita teme vezane za isključenost odraslih polaznika koji nose etiketu „oni koji su napustili školu“. Naša namera je da doprinesemo diskusiji o odgovarajućim metodama istraživanja, kao i tehnikama koje se mogu primeniti u cilju boljeg razumevanja razloga koji mlade muškarce i žene navode da rano napuštaju školovanje. Naš projekat uključuje sprovođenje niza biografskih intervjua sa diplomcima škole „Druga šansa“ u Larisi u Grčkoj. U ovom radu razmatramo teme koje su proizašle iz istraživačkog materijala – intervjua sa muškarcima i ženama, a tiču se barijera koje su, prema njihovim naracijama i našoj proceni, dovele do napuštanja formalnog obrazovanja. Analizom iskustava učesnika razmatraju se razlozi koji su ih naveli da se vrate u obrazovni sistem i to upravo u program škole „Druga šansa“.

Ključne reči: odrasli polaznici, transformativno učenje, obrazovna biografija.

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