

Contesting prophecies: path of university students of popular origin

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ABSTRACT:

This paper presents results of research carried out on young university students regularly enrolled at Sergipe Federal University (UFS), the only public university of the State. These young students come from popular segments of society who take part in the *Programa Conexões de Saberes* [Knowledge Connection Programme], which carries out initiatives destined to encourage these kinds of students to go on to higher education identifying their knowledge and main difficulties in remaining in the federal universities in the perspective of overcoming the dichotomy between scientific knowledge and popular knowledge. The schooling of most of these youths is continually submitted to “tension and discontinuity”. Despite scarcity of research one can observe in Brazil a growing number of youths that escape the vicious circle of poverty and low amount of schooling and who make it to public university. How do some youths escape their “destiny” of marginality and exclusion which these sectors of society are usually “sentenced” to, and arrive at public higher education? To answer these questions we opted for a qualitative methodology placing the statements of these youths at the centre of the analysis.

KEY WORDS:

Popular youths, Education, University, Path.

CONSTRUCTING A STARTING POINT

Recent transformations that have marked contemporary society, such as the lessening role of the State in the social area, the restructuring of employment, structural unemployment and the rise in cash-in-hand work, has had an intense effect on the poorest members of society, with the most perverse reflexes in peripheral economy countries, such as Brazil. On the other hand, there is increasing demand for schooled and qualified labour³.

In this background access to education at increasingly higher levels, such as the 3rd degree, emerges as a relevant factor, although not crucial in the paths of these youths. Meanwhile, examining the educational experience of youths of a popular origin, dropping out and repeating school years, leading to older students in a class, is commonplace among this segment of the population.

The school path of most of these youths constantly involves the experience of “eternal return” to school, or simply exclusion from the public education system (Spósito, 1994). Furthermore, “tension and discontinuity” are prevalent in the school path of most of the underprivileged classes. The gaps in teaching, linked to other shortfalls concerning social and political rights, as well as the dual character of the funding of education (public and private), are some of the factors that contribute towards accentuating inequalities as regards access for youths from the popular sectors to higher education (Charlot, 2000).

Demand has increased for wider and better schooling without however necessarily guaranteeing socio-professional insertion, progress and stability, even if, simultaneously, these are considered basic requirements for better competitiveness and employability in the job market. Simultaneously and contradictorily, according to Zanten (1999, cited by Zago, 2006), schooling inequalities deepen among the social classes. It is precisely the deepening of these inequalities that has stimulated new research in the field of educational sciences focusing on the issue of the young university student of popular origin.

Despite the scarcity of research analysing how youths escape the vicious circle, common sense suggests poverty and a low amount of schooling are synonymous. Nevertheless, it is possible to observe a growing number of youths who escape this vicious circle and make it to public university. The multiplication of programmes contributing towards enabling these youths to enter university has helped change the panorama. Passing the university entrance exam holds a double meaning for this population: on the one hand it represents the conquering of a dream, a goal, the possibility to rewrite the future using schooling as a social ladder; on the other hand it represents the announcement that new obstacles will arise, given that socioeconomic difficulties do not solve themselves automatically through enrolling in higher education.

As suggested by Bori and Durham (2000), the fact is the barriers to entering and staying in public higher education have been broken by a group of

poor students. What has enabled some youths to escape the “destiny” of marginality and exclusion that these sectors of society are “sentenced” to? What was the path of these youths to reach public university? What is the impact and significance of participation in programmes that aim to make sure the youths stay at university? To what extent does “making up part” of these programmes interfere with the academic knowledge? These are some of the issues we are interested in discussing based on the statements of the research subjects: youths of a popular origin who have entered Sergipe Federal University (UFS) and which are inserted as scholarship students in one of the programmes of the sector henceforth entitled *Knowledge Connection Programme*.

THE RESEARCH PATHS

METHODOLOGICAL PATH: SITUATING THE FIELD AND THE RESEARCH SUBJECTS

Considering the basic research aim was to make the centre of the analysis the paths of the youths coming from popular segments who entered public university, their experience in entering the world of academic knowledge, as well as the reflections on insertion in a programme geared towards staying in higher education, we opted for an essentially qualitative approach.

As such, the words of the youths constituted the raw material able to reveal their expectations, representations, frustrations, their relation with their community of origin, the image they have of themselves and others, and what taking part in the *Programme* means to them based on their social “origin”.

To achieve these aims the youths were encouraged to write a Dairy, freely registering their experiences on the activities of the *Programme* and on the socialising among their university colleagues, discoveries, difficulties and conquests in this transition between the two worlds: the community and the university. Furthermore, we took advantage of the “*Caminhadas* [Paths]” booklet, where all participants in the *Programme* (at national level) had to write their life stories.

Another tool for the production and collection of data were the focal groups held in the first months the youths joined the *Programme* (May 2006). The

focal group⁴ functioned as a discussion group set up in a flexible regime.

Considering the group of youths was chiefly made up of females, whenever possible we aimed to ensure a balance was struck in defining the choice of the Diaries⁵ that would be analysed and the composition itself of the focal groups.

The central subjects of the research are, therefore, young university students of popular origin, who are scholarship students in the *Knowledge Connection Programme* at UFS. These youths also the subjects and the objective of the *Knowledge Connection Programme* itself, and are simultaneously those who implement the actions formulated by the *Programme*.

KNOWLEDGE CONNECTION PROGRAMME:

HIGHLIGHTING SOME DATA

This Programme was chosen because of its general characteristics and nationwide coverage. In order to better situate the reports constructed by the youths we briefly present the history and aims of the *Programme* they took part in.

The *Knowledge Connection Programme* originated from a project called Popular Spaces Universities Network, set up in 2002 by the Favelas/RJ Observatory. In 2003 it was run by the Fluminense Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro, funded by the University Extension Programme run by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The following year it was run in five federal universities, in partnership with the Secretariat of Continuing Education, Alphabetization and Diversity (SECAD). In May 2005, nine universities were included and in 2006, another seventeen joined, making the current total of thirty-one Federal Institutions of Higher Education (IFES).

In line with the modern educational trend which is heading towards overcoming the dichotomy between scientific and popular knowledge, the *Programme* granted scholarships to university students coming from popular communities, so they could carry out actions with their communities of origin; They carry out academic activities aimed at identifying, assessing and proposing policies for students of popular origin to enter and remain in federal universities; they value the personal, school and community paths and the knowledge derived thereof.

The overall goal is to enlarge relations between the university and residents of popular areas, their institutions and organisations, encouraging the exchange of knowledge and know-how between these two sociocultural territories. Towards this aim the initiatives are based around three strategic guidelines: institutional, training and community.

The (UFS) *Programme* began in 2006 with 25 youths: 15 female and 10 male. They are the subjects of this research.

INTERTWINED WORLDS: UNVEILING THE PATHS OF THE YOUTHS

Analysing all the material enabled us to focus on the path of the scholarship youths up until their entrance into UFS and their attitudes, fears and dreams at the start of the *Programme*. Our starting point was reading “*Caminhadas*” written by them, the discussions of the focal groups and looking at their Diaries with respect to these themes.

SHAPING “WARRIORS” EVERY DAY:

LIFE BEFORE GETTING TO UNIVERSITY

The life of these youths did not start when they passed their entrance exam into UFS. A long path leads up to that moment as shown in the “*Caminhadas*” texts. In general the descriptions relate the various obstacles faced by the youths and their families, the solidarity and support networks, made up of friends and family, who act as an emotional-caring back-up that help create the possibility (and only the possibility) to overcome these difficulties and shortfalls. Indeed, the family plays a major role in the “memories” written by the youths.

The analysis basically drew up 4 profiles of youths. One we have called “typical” and 3 others that progressively move away from this model. It is not a question of building categories to classify the youths, but rather to identify and understand the various *processes* that structure a life path of the students. The reference to a “typical” profile seeks to summarise a set of events of the same kind that affect the youths and which have been overcome through psycho-social devices and similar.

A first characteristic of the “typical” profile of these youths is the life permeated by difficulties and often

much suffering. It was not only money that was lacking, but very often the father as well. The separation of their parents left a mark on their stories and was even more difficult to get over when the father was replaced by a hated stepfather — although “*Caminhadas*” also contains stepfathers who are respected, who help their stepchildren. Indeed, for all the families, including those of the middle class, this kind of separation is a painful event for the children, even traumatic, but when dealing with poor families the ordeal is not only emotional but also socio-economic.

My parents separated well before I was born. (...) I never realised the hell that was in store for me, joining an absent and anonymous father and a falsely moralistic stepfather who did not transmit the least ethical or moral values and from then onwards I had to put up with him every day because my mother forced me to live with them and my brother.

My mother, when she got pregnant, was thrown out of the house and had to fight against everybody who did not accept my birth. She lived in the street, asking for money, she was a cleaner, worked in the market and got by like that, going hungry, but always feeding me, clothing me when I was cold, giving me medicine when I almost died, praying for me when she saw no solution, giving me love when she didn’t know what it was; she was humiliated and suffered prejudice because of her belly, but the heroine of the story was strong and today I’m here to tell my story.

Other events shook the lives of some of the scholarship students: drought, a father’s accident or an accident of the youth himself, muggings, family victim of fraud, etc. Some “*Caminhadas*” relate a sequence of difficulties and events of this nature.

Even when the stories are not brimming with poverty, accidents or muggings, situations are described that cause sacrifices compounding what we can call a school of suffering of a family origin that leads the youths to conclude: “I didn’t have a childhood”.

I remember that because of work my parents never attended any school meeting or event. Even when I cried for my mother to go and see me dance in the play or on mothers’ day she could never go, and whenever she tried to go she always arrived late, when everything

was practically finished. (...) I remember that (...) my books, uniform, schoolbag, etc. were second hand, because my older sister studied a year ahead of me, I always ended up with most of the things used by her. (...) everything I had was old, but I was young and perhaps because of this I didn't understand.

Those who managed to escape their social situation for short period of times by attending a private or Catholic school were faced with another kind of suffering: the shame and fear of the prejudice deriving from their class origin.

This environment led me to have a certain shame regarding my origin. I lost count of the number of times I made an excuse not to take my school friends home, the number of times I hid my books from the rest of the class so they didn't see they were second-hand, for fear of being labelled poor and discriminated against. It was this whole process that made me aware of what it's like being excluded from society (...).

Given the description of this panorama we ask ourselves: how did these youths escape their destiny of low schooling given so few chances?

At the core of the answer is the family, and very often the figure of the mother plays a major role. The family is represented in the writings of the young as “warriors”, “fighters”, and these qualities are exemplified in the example of the mother in the great majority of the “*Caminhadas*”.

The effort made to ensure studies are continued is also often related to the figure of the mother⁶ who “fights” tenaciously to make sure her children stay at school.

We were all brought up equally; what was done for one was done for all and I started studying from a young age. My mother always said that the most important thing we have in life, after God of course, is our studies and as she was not able to give us other possessions at least she did not leave us without studies so that we could have a better job in the future.

I don't know when I decided to enrol to university, but from very early I knew I wanted to have a profession that I really loved. I believe it was because my mother always made our studies the number one

priority for my sisters and I and despite doing the whole of the fundamental and middle-level schooling in public schools and suffering the disadvantages inherent to them, it never took away the pleasure I obtained from studying and I managed to change my life though it.

As well as the mother, sometimes the father or the grandmother⁷ or other people played an important role in the youth's success: teachers or other school staff.

Not taking no for an answer, the coordinator decided to offer a discount of almost 70% to enable me to study at a school that was better prepared and that is what happened. I gained the scholarship and began attending the same school as my brother. (...) My mother, an extremely important figure in my life, as well as all the teachers who helped me, always motivated me to study, saying I should grasp my opportunities.

The “typical” profile scholarship students have a principle: life is a permanent fight and we should “constantly fight for our goals without ever giving up, despite the obstacles that come up”. Fighting, being a warrior, following the example of their mother or father, is the only way to achieve success, and is also the way to maintain dignity when you are poor and, at the end of the day, find the road to happiness despite the difficulties in life. But not all the youths fit into this “typical” profile.

Other processes, different from those analysed above contribute to structuring the history of the other youths involved, generally in a less turbulent background. We can identify three cases that differ from this context — João, Carla and Bernardo.

João's life story, in contrast to most of the scholarship students, encompasses a happy childhood. One is hit by the description of happiness as much as by the other descriptions of misery when trying to understand these youths' entrance into UFS.

Well, I grew up in a typical popular community, or a community society (...) it is not just us who lives our lives, but everybody who is part of the community (..) I was always surrounded by friends (..) my childhood was marvellous. (...) Between twelve and fourteen I joined a musical band called *consciência negra* [black

conscience] (...) While I was doing that, I showed my city my skills with a ball at my feet. I was considered one of the best footballers of the city (..) at eighteen I learned to enjoy reading and philosophising. From then onwards I decided to do the entrance exam into Sergipe Federal University. I managed to pass in vernacular literature.

Life “in a community”, recognition of his football skills, his closeness to his friends, the group activities and the sense of belonging to a “community society” seem to have functioned as a source of strength that João drew on to move forward. It was different from the “typical” path in which “strength”, “a fighting spirit” emanated from examples of the family; here it is the continuing insertion in groups, the sense of “community” that occupies this role. Added to this is the hard-working attitude that leads João to consider that “I make my own path”⁸.

Observing her writings in “*Caminhada*”, Carla was never one of the good pupils. She leaned more, by her own admission, to the profile of a “problem pupil”. She failed several years, but in the fourth year of fundamental teaching came across an “understanding” teacher and without knowing what happened “I began to create a liking for study, albeit tenuous, but enough to pass the year”. Later, in middle school, she encountered “a team of exemplary teachers” who incited her to take a bigger interest in her studies:

It was then that I began to dedicate myself to studies, although I did not have a clear aim, but I had hope of improving my life. I started to study a lot, I stopped being a cleaner and started giving tutorials (..). I finished middle school and did the entrance exam in Portuguese Literature. I chose this course because I identified with the subject. The truth is I identified with the way the subject was taught by my middle school teacher⁹.

In Carla’s case the stimuli driving her towards further education, late but persistent, are not the communities but the teachers, who, functioning as symbolic mothers, sustained the schooling of the youth who is now studying Pedagogy to become a teacher and perhaps continue to the work of her symbolic mothers. But, beyond this, her hard work is also perceptible, as shown by the way Carla ends her text:

I want to say that to get to this point was not easy. I worked as a cleaner, a tutor, EJA teacher¹⁰, I sew, embroidered, bargained. But I never gave up.

A third case that is even further removed from the “typical” profile of the youth from the popular masses who enrolled in UFS, is that of Bernardo. He had no intention of going to university; he refused the idea, even after becoming a UFS student! He is one of those students who resists his own academic success. Bernardo probably asked himself the following question: Doesn’t he who educates himself, changes and “improves his life”, betray his origins, his illiterate parents, his friends who have no schooling, and betray himself? (See, for example, Charlot, 2005).

Today I have a different way of viewing university. I am not in search of certainties, but understanding. The idea is basically this: I didn’t want to be part of privilege. University is a privilege and that is indisputable in my opinion — more or less... By becoming part of this group I would be contradicting what I had wanted from the 1st year of schooling — to be among my equals. (...) I always thought university was a selfish and omitting path. (..). Maybe it was because of this that my start at university was so empty, without goals. I paid little attention in the lessons and flatly refused to see any recognition in the institution.

Bernardo had to discover that he could use university to enhance his potential without this being synonymous with betrayal. He gained the ability to, if not overcome, at least live with the tension between these worlds through his insertion in the *Knowledge Connection Programme*. He had the chance to work with low-income communities and understand that his university education could be put at the service of his social origin. In several ways being part of the *Programme* was essential so that the tension between his ideas and his experience could be viewed without feelings of betrayal, strengthening the hard work ethic present in him.

In Bernardo’s case the hard work is established in close association with the socio-political ideal of fighting to change society and not following the example of his mother, of admiration for teachers and participation in communities.

I also know that plans for the future depend on what we do today. Waiting was a passive attitude that makes no sense to me now.

In their different “*Caminhadas*” the youths find their “angel warriors” who, in one way or other, have kept them on the path towards further schooling. There is no doubt that these aspects played an important role in their enrolment in public university, but one cannot diminish the role played by the school. The story of many of the youths was “a journey of hope deposited in studying”. “I liked school immediately,” they say, “I was always a good pupil”, “I always liked studying”, “I was always a pupil who showed application and dedication”.

There is no place for determinism in the story of the scholarship students. The logic behind it is different from simple cause and effect. It is an interactive and amply accumulative process, that takes place over time: the mother insists on the importance of study and when arriving at school the child enjoys it, becomes a good pupil, is praised and encouraged by the teachers, gains confidence in himself, takes in the message expounding the importance of study and constructs a dream which, one day, will lead to a desire to enrol in a federal university.

The story of the schooling of the youths is therefore a family story and therefore a social story. A story in which the entrance exam is viewed as family success or failure for years, given that most of them do not manage to pass at the first attempt.

It wasn't easy listening to the jokes and laughter at the expense of my failure. The backing I got from my mother, brother and some friends motivated me to keep fighting.

After I passed my entrance exam and enrolled in UFS my mother, after 40 years staying still, began studying again, in youth and adult literacy classes.

On the other hand there is not the slightest determinism in the story of these youths. Indeed, if there was, they would not have enrolled in UFS. However, to overcome shortfalls and all kinds of obstacles in their way these subjects needed desire.

In delving into the “*Caminhadas*” we can discover clues as to what was needed to foster this want

and desire: living in a fighting family, which encouraged study and finding people who believed in them are powerful forces that act against the apparently predefined social destiny. But they do not function automatically, in the exterior. Stimulation from family and some teachers is not always effective. It only has an effect when interiorised, taken in by the youth himself. Therefore, there is also an individual aspect such that the sacrifices made, dreams and strength come together to make it possible to pursue the goal of “entering university”.

I PASSED THE ENTRANCE EXAM!!!

BETWEEN CONQUEST AND NEW CHALLENGES

These youths from popular origins who enter into the federal university are part of a wide sector of Brazilian society who have extremely limited sociological probabilities of passing the higher education entrance exam, and even more so when talking about a federal public university. We can say these youths represent what sociology has come to call atypical successes: the success is obtained with much effort, suffering, stubbornness and “fight” against the fatalism of social destinies.

To constitute this resistance to the fatality of “failure” these youths had to have a clearly mapped out aim: to pass the entrance exam, and to do this they had to nurture a considerable level of “stubbornness” to counter the dispiriting expectations translated in the educational statistics, and also the lack of belief disseminated among friends and family.

I was stubborn and always believed in my possibilities. I fought for what I believed in, and I worked so hard in the market carrying loads because I knew that the family budget wouldn't enable me to pay for the entrance exam and buy the books I'd need. I remember perfectly that neither in the municipal library nor at school was there a single copy of the books required for the study programme. I worked six weeks to buy the first book (...).

Overcoming the obstacle of the entrance exam is a collective conquest and glory of the family, but also of the individual. The victorious youths experience, in symbolic form, pleasure in contradicting all the trends, and feel strengthened, prepared to face up to new difficulties that come with passing the exam.

I managed to pass the entrance exam in 2005 for the Geography Degree. For a poor family, having a family member go to University is a rarity and being the first one to enrol in such an institution brings a big weight of responsibility (...).

This made me feel as big as the sea which is untiring, as despite the setbacks, and without a good basic education, and attempting the entrance exam for the first time, I managed to achieve a huge dream. I can't deny it tasted of victory, mainly through the pleasure of showing all those who didn't believe in me that I won the battle.

After the deserved commemoration comes the reality which presents new challenges: of a material nature — resources to fund the cost of university life; of a cultural nature — the cultural gulf between their world and the intellectualised world of the middle class; of an affective nature — living far from the family for the first time. But also encountering new friends, new experiences, discoveries.

I lived and I live at UFS as if it was the first day of lessons. At the academy I made great friends, I met true masters, I find a lot of knowledge and obstacles (...) I know dreams are like that, difficult to be realised.

From that moment onwards I waged another battle; my mother really could not sustain me (...) I asked for residence and thank God, I entered. For the first time I was far from those who had been with me at every moment (...) it was difficult to face up to the changes that occurred, the lack of money to buy school material, the school pass and even food at the start. (...) The residence also brought me a lot of good things, it allowed me to grow and I began to have an independent life, without mentioning the great happiness and very special people I have found (...).

The youths explain that the fight will go on and often they no longer have the family or community to back them up, who contributed to them “fighting” up until the entrance exam. At the same time they live with the sensation that to pass the entrance exam is not synonymous with becoming part of the academic world, and the tension between the worlds is experienced with more suffering and a feeling of

being lost. They seek a balance between these worlds, pursuing the goal that victory in the entrance exam can produce transformations not only in their own life, but also contributing towards bringing the university to the popular segments of society.

In the texts of “*Caminhadas*” joining the *Programme* seems to respond, albeit partially, to this tension. There, they find other youths coming from the same world and have the chance to make a difference in the reality of the popular communities. But this is also a discovery that demands time given that the various youths enrol on the *Programme* without knowing exactly what for. Hence, the expectations in relation to the *Programme* also change over time.

WHAT ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY “LIFE” AND THE KNOWLEDGE CONNECTION PROGRAMME? LISTENING TO WHAT THESE YOUTHS SAY

What are the expectations of these university students in relation to the *Programme* and the possibility of lending meaning to their academic education? Is their interest influenced by the financial issue? What are the reasons, representations and expectations of these youths? Seeking to answer these questions we used the Diaries.

Reading and categorizing based on the Diaries showed us that for 45.9% of the young students entering into the *Knowledge Connection Programme* the main reason for joining the initiative was linked to their wanting to obtain a first professional experience in which solidarity could be exercised. This tie between the first professional experience and joining the *Programme* seems to be linked to the idea of having a professional career, a career built over time which demands a series of skills and qualifications that can only be acquired and validated at university. This is behind the expectations in escaping temporary and precarious employment that almost all the youths had experienced.

The second ranked reason was the financial aspect (13.6%): the scholarship of the *Programme* covered at least part of the expenses of “university life”. The possibility of continuing to fight for their dreams (10.2%) and, finally, the satisfaction afforded by taking part in activities involving popular communities (6.8%) are the other reasons for entering the *Programme* that are outlined in the Diaries¹¹.

In addition to the Diaries two focal groups were organised¹², bringing together different youths from the *Programme*. What “was in the minds” of the youths in the first months of participation? What were their representations in relation to the experiences proposed? These aspects were explored in the focal groups where the youths could express themselves freely¹³.

I always come to work happy, it's not something I've got to make an effort to do, it's my first experience and I'm very excited about it.

I didn't know it could be so cool; each day brings an extremely interesting and marvellous surprise.

Now the fear has gone, like in the first day of school where the anxiety is terrible.

We see a lot of theory, I'm looking forward to putting into practice everything that I'm learning at university (...).

We observed the presence of differing “feelings”: enthusiasm and pleasure given the possibilities of doing things in the real world, giving meaning to all the “theories”, mixed in with fear and anguish in facing something new and unknown, such as “giving a lesson”¹⁴. Added to this is the anxiety caused by their own ability to attain the objectives they have set themselves and more than that, to meet the expectations of the surrounding communities. The responsibility as regards the activities goes beyond the institutional and takes on an individual dimension. This responsibility is also in relation to the other youths, who like them entered UFS and have the possibility of finding a programme like the *Knowledge Connection Programme*. Therefore, pleasure and anguish are added to by the challenge, the challenge constituted by the “others”¹⁵ and themselves.

If it depends on us, we will try to give our best to try and keep the project at a high and continuous level of quality (...).

I'm anxious. There are a lot of students who need this opportunity; I intend to fight for this opportunity.

There are communities who need and don't have this opportunity, this is what Brazil needs.

In these initial moments of taking part in the Programme the youths mention the financial issue discreetly and emphasise the personal fulfilment that seems to be tied in with the demand for social justice and equality in a discourse of denouncement and commitment towards “changing people” and “social transformation”.

In doing something that leaves us personally fulfilled, this provides us with pleasure, but on top of that we get paid.

Now this role of the project of social transformation has to be inserted so as to act in conjunction — that is where this adventure really lies (...).

Not only with pedagogical techniques, but also with the issue of making people aware of their access to justice, their right to have rights.

Despite the commitment towards “social transformation”, seldom do the youths veer towards a systematised political discourse indicating class issues:

People who were historically excluded from the productive process, who are undergoing a process of alienation, because they don't understand the historical moment and the economic situation in which they are inserted, do not have the tools to fight against this problem. How are we going to work with people who are part of the underprivileged community? These people live in that historical relation of the dominator and the dominated. Only they don't understand that they are being dominated, and the other class retains the hegemony. Hence, we are the bearers of this new knowledge which we must implant there.

FINAL WORDS

Even if the youths believe in the force of political and pedagogical action, another aspect emerges to take a strong role: the use of themselves as an example. They themselves are the example of how it is possible to overcome all obstacles, even paying the

price of suffering and constant fighting. As such, in the work they carry out with the communities, more than putting into practice the content and methods that they learned in their schooling, including at university, they put into practice their own example as a symbolic representation of the goal that is pursued in this work: changing the unjust order of the world, or at least contributing to this.

Perhaps because we come from poor communities, it will serve as motivation. I believe that in witnessing our examples of conquests, they will mirror it themselves and realise that they too can do the same. As well as the knowledge we will pass on of academic life, they will also see in us a certain source of inspiration.

The use of the self, the endeavour of the self, transforms these youths into the very articulation between distant knowledge and worlds. Identification therefore takes place between the youths and the communities where they work and hence the success of one merges into the success of the other: helping the community is, therefore, a contribution towards socio-political change. But following this logic of identification a risk arises of adopting a vanguard posture that will breed tension with the motivations and the commitment towards transforming society. This aspect was also explored in the focal groups aimed at discussing the posture of the youths concerning the knowledge of the community that he intends to “help”.

It will be something that comes and goes. I'll start by giving one kind of lesson, but I'm not going to end with the same, because I'm going to learn with them, I'm going to see how they are better motivated, how they learn better. I'll then be able to analyse when they are more willing to learn.

When we work on local development, the first step we have to take is to go there and get to know what it's like on the ground. We'll find out how they work, how they survive excluded from this capitalist system, working as craftsmen. After this initial phase we will study more and try to perfect the best way to carry out their craft. In any event there will be an exchange.

Sharing the knowledge that they acquired at university with the communities in which they work is a considerable challenge for these young students. A challenge that incorporates a basic tension: the fact that they are now university students symbolises an invitation to distance themselves from the knowledge and references of the communities. Meanwhile, it was precisely their social background of a popular origin that contributed to their entering the *Knowledge Connection Programme*. As if that was not enough they are invited to work to attempt to bring together distant worlds: the popular community and the university, making use of themselves and the knowledge they have acquired, also at university. However, the experience of university life is marked by individualism.

There is indeed a contradiction that the start may act as a weight around their neck holding back these youths. They are no longer simply members of their popular community like all the others, they are now also university students, but not a typical university student coming from the middle classes of society. They are university students coming from the popular segments who will produce various ways of dealing with these conflicts: to make meaning out of their university education starting from their popular origin and hence subverting the individualist logic of the public university, at least for themselves; to renounce; to continue to fight, are just some of the possibilities we can point out.

ENDNOTES

1. Doctor in Educational Sciences, University of Paris 8. Professor of the Post-Graduate Nucleus in Education at Sergipe Federal University (UFS). Leader of the Group of Studies and Research into Education and Contemporariness.

2. Doctor in Educational Sciences, University of Paris 8. Assistant Professor – Dep. of Education of the UFS. Researcher of the Group of Studies and Research on Education and Contemporariness and the National Council of Scientific Development and Technology (CNPq).

3. Around 49% of national unemployment affects the 15-24 year-old age group, translated into 3.3 million unemployed youths in the country (Pochmann, 2001).

4. The focal groups discussions were transcribed and we maintained the same form in the citations used.

5. We maintained the text written by the scholarship students, just correcting the punctuation and basic spelling mistakes.

6. Although rare, some descriptions do not put the mother as the main figure behind the valuing of study, which in no way reduces the importance attributed to her role when the issue is a “family fighter”.

7. It is very rare in “*Caminhadas*” for the father to take the active role in encouraging the schooling of the scholarship students.

8. This is the title that the young João attributed to his “*Caminhada*”.

9. Carla did not pass the entrance exam at the first attempt, but by giving extra tutoring she earned the money needed for a second attempt.

10. Youth and Adult Education

11. Around 13.6% of the youths gave other reasons.

12. We decided to organise two groups made up of youths of the two sexes owing the number of youths (25).

13. The focal groups were led by a teacher with vast research experience using this methodology. We decided on this strategy to avoid any kind of constraint that could be caused by the presence of coordinators who, despite their good relations, are hierarchically superior.

14. Here the youths mentioned one of the activities: a popular pre higher education entrance exam. The youths are in charge of planning and carrying out the lessons with pedagogical monitoring and general coordination.

15. “Others” refers to society in general — colleagues, family, communities with whom they were involved during the *Programme*.

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