

Secondary Specialist Arts Education: Perceptions of Youths in Northern Portugal¹

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Abstract

This article reflects on the mediations between the school and youth worlds, based on perceptions of students from northern Portugal about their education. We focus on secondary education (which is compulsory to all youths in the country since 2009), more specifically in the context of specialist arts education, one of the options available to Portuguese youths. Our investigation looks into the challenges of secondary education and the required integration of youths into its context, while taking on the perspective of youths in order to problematize the response of specialist arts education to elements of the social, cognitive, civic and professional order intrinsic in school education. To achieve these goals, we conducted six biographical interviews with students in the three years of secondary specialist arts education at an institution in the city of Porto. The youths' ages ranged from 16 to 18 years old, and the interviews explore their educational trajectory in order to biographically situate the meanings they attribute to attending a specialist arts program in secondary education. Data were analyzed based on a narrative approach with the help of content analysis techniques. Results indicate a valuing of the educational process by students, one in which a major part is played by school dynamics that allow deconstructing hierarchic systems, in a bet carried out through informality and innovation. These are corroborated by a spirit of diversity and social dialogue.

Keywords

Secondary education – Youths – Schooling – Narratives.

Introduction

Recognizing that the school has always faced challenges woven in a dialectical relationship between the society and its interests concerning schooling processes implies that the possible meanings students might attribute to their school trajectories should be read in an expanded setting of elements. It requires us to essentially consider that the school space is a place where, over the years, thousands of students seek a meaning

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for life (ABRANTES, 2003) and each of them, in virtue of the interaction between social and identity aspects and school dynamics, will understand the effects of schooling in a particular way (DUBET; MARTUCCELLI, 1996; LAHIRE, 1997, 2006; CHARLOT, 2000, 2009; DAYRELL, 2007; SILVA, 2010).

The construction of the school world is concomitant and interdependent with the configuration of the youth world, in an articulation of processes that can lead to distinct trajectories, according to youths' dispositions and the dynamics they are part of in the school environment (cf. ABRANTES, 2003). In this respect Charlot (2009) points that the relationship built between youths and school is benefitted whenever there is a true project, i.e., a project intrinsic in the subject experiencing it. The possible meanings of a school, as Abrantes (2003) corroborates, are locally defined based on the practices, representations, positions and dispositions of the very actors who form the institution.

Therefore, we must acknowledge that all education is marked by the time and place it is produced in (BOAVIDA; AMADO, 2006) and is thus realized in a dynamic of various spatial, social and historical contexts, never free from reflecting features of any of these elements. Considering this scenario, this article is based on part of the results of an investigation about the perceptions of Portuguese secondary arts education students about their education. The study was conducted over two years with students attending a public specialist arts school situated in the north of the country. Here, we briefly discuss the question of educative ideologies in Portugal, the meanings and goals of secondary education and its relationship with the youth world, in order to interpret the meanings that students attribute to the school and, particularly, to secondary arts specialist education.

About Secondary Education and the Challenges of Youths' Integration

In Portugal, school education is divided in four cycles. The first three correspond to basic education and comprise nine years. Secondary education begins in the tenth year and comprises another three years (i.e., tenth, eleventh and twelfth). In this last stage, youths can choose an area of curricular interest from a range that consists of four modalities: technological, vocational, scientific-humanistic and arts specialist courses. In the present work, the debate is focused on the arts specialist option, which is only offered in two institutions in the whole country.

Attendance to secondary education became compulsory in 2009, with the enactment of the law n. 85/2009, which extended the length of compulsory education in Portugal to twelve years. Since then, the academic world witnessed the reopening of debates on the goals of this cycle of studies, customarily identified with the transition to higher education. The meaning of a compulsory school, in which the voluntary act of education is turned into an institutional relationship regulated and monitored by the state, reorganizes the dialectical relationships between the educative processes and social agents. In any case, it implies observing that simply making attendance compulsory does not solve, in any respect, the so-called school crises. Rather, it makes existing problems even more complex, regarding from organizational to pedagogical aspects.

One of the central questions in secondary education concerns the neoliberal influences that imply an increasing presence and influence of forms of social relations arising from the imperative of competitiveness in the school context (cf. ANTUNES; SÁ, 2010). These logics pervade from the process of assigning grades to students to how institution's identities are formed. In addition, there is an inescapable tension created by the formation of distinct social, academic and cognitive, interactive and relational worlds within a same educational environment.

In any case, the identity crisis of the secondary cycle in the Portuguese context can be read within the meanings that its own evolution bequeathed to it. Teixeira (2010), among other authors, argues that the current secondary education has never been able to apply a clear personality to its own configuration, whether a vocational or a professional one. According to the author, despite the changes implemented in the field of secondary school, little was done to allow it to overcome the status of a transitory stage where students wait to access higher education or the job market. In accordance with Barroso (1999), the author emphasizes ideas that secondary school should be configured as an entity open to its environment, combining multifunctionality and integration of local resources so it can define an identity of its own.

It is a bet on a dialogue-centered school with a more horizontal organizational outline. This bet assumes that only by developing communication, linguistic, discovery, scientific, technological and community competencies can we think about an educational project of secondary school that prioritizes the possibility to educate youths to contribute for a society based on freedom and the circulation of people and ideas (TEIXEIRA, 2010; CARNEIRO, 1999). In this perspective, Abrantes (2003) points that it is necessary to view youths as educational actors whose practices change and form school reality. To him, the crossroads the school is at resides in balancing, on the one hand, an ideology that bets on innovation, autonomy and diversification, and, on the other, responding to the discourse centered on grades, the importance of authority and a bet on returning to the "basic types of knowledge".

Also thinking about the centrality students should have in the construction of a school identity, and advocating a qualitative evolution of secondary education, Teixeira and Flores (2010) develop the argument that the perception of hierarchic deconstruction of the school as an institution can collaborate to improve the educational system. So, by reconfiguring the student's position, the conception of school as democracy is privileged, in the sense of a school guided by constructive dialogue and based on trust between the educational actors, which seems to us a fundamental lead for interpreting the meanings of formal education.

Charlot's (2000, 2009) investigation in France adds to the reading of school dynamics the understanding that success in school is not a simple matter of capital, but, rather, of work, more precisely of activities and practices that take shape within the school – emphasizing, again, that all educational actors must engage in the educational processes. Based on a logic of recognizing the student as a "social being", whether a child or an adolescent, Charlot (2000, 2009) discusses the fact that the student is a subject who acts in and over the world, is inscribed in the logic of a family and, in the education field,

produces himself and is produced by means of it. Therefore, one must perceive youth and school not as separately built identities but as congruously inscribed in the logic of the subject, as Abrantes (2003) proposes.

As regards the recognition of the school by students themselves, Charlot's (2009) work points to the idea that there are no doubts about its importance. According to him, what should be examined in students' attitude is their disposition for mobilization in school activities. Now, students recognize the importance of the institution, but that does not mean that they are therefore committed to school activities. Thus, the challenge of engagement in educational processes is configured. There must be students who are mobilized to and within the activities exercised. Even so, Lahire (2006) corroborates the idea that the school is so widely recognized that even those who have not come to form the tastes and habits that would allow them to be in consonance with it, they, too, recognize it.

Given these challenges and the macro scenario of the meanings of secondary education, it seems to us that the main issue revolves around the opposition between adolescent integration and school norms (BARRÈRE; MARTUCCELLI, 2000). This adolescent integration can, as a matter of fact, be set up in the school under the logic of the class, not always peacefully (CHARLOT, 2009), or through the formation of subgroups of colleagues or friends. It is worth highlighting here that students who feel connected to their school and teachers tend to show less indiscipline, as the effects of these relations decrease the impact of indiscipline due to a greater attachment and commitment to colleagues (DEMANET; VAN HOUTTE, 2012). Likewise, when educational processes are mediated by a professional who feels interested in and stands out for a full involvement with the students, rather than only their grades, this promotes learning environments that generate contexts rich in formativeness, which can intermeditate the development and identity formation of youths (RICH; SCHACHTER, 2012).

It is important to highlight that the school is increasingly dealing with various publics, and to think about their integration requires recognizing them. About the heterogeneity of youths attending school and their socialization processes, Barbosa (2007) infers that students' dispositions regarding schooling is also marked by the discrepancy between the socialization available at school and the socialization in effect in the family environment. This implies recognizing human beings as plural subjects who are permanently built and updated, experiencing a process that is not univocal, but clearly differentiated in terms of influences and how they are interpreted, and who, despite forming a concrete nucleus, experience significant transformations over successive resocializations.

With regard to the meanings that the school can configure in the life of subjects, Charlot (2009) adds to the discussion the idea that school lessons are viewed by a great part of students as devoid of value. According to this logic, which is widely discussed in works about education, the institution seems legitimate as it is capable to justify the future, but it has no meaning in the present, which constitutes a great dilemma. The school time would lack the existence of a day-to-day life, a present time, or, as Alves (2006) says, it is a school from which students still expect the origin of "success in life". A complex prerogative, considering that school as an institution has evolved from a time of promises to one of uncertainties (CANÁRIO, 2005).

With regard to youth and its constitution, Dayrell (2007) notes that the school is invaded by youth's life and becomes the space of a young circumscription, i.e., youth's

dynamics pervade the school and, precisely for this reason, these dynamics begin to alter school dynamics. It is within this context that Dubet (2006) discusses the idea that becoming a student no longer means submitting to established models, but resides, rather, in building an experience as such and assigning a meaning to such work. To Dayrell (2007), youths should build their integration into a school order by finding in themselves the principles of motivation and the meanings assigned to school experiences. A hard task which requires recognizing oneself in the world, an exercise youths pose a great resistance to (CHARLOT, 2009).

Given these problematics, which discuss youths and their relations/dispositions within the school context, as well as dealing with the scenario of interrelated complexities in building the identity of secondary education in Portugal, the following sections promote a debate about the meanings that specialist arts education has been able to imprint in the lives of its students. Thus, in the light of the questions raised thus far, and considering that to listen to students is to imply them democratically in the debate about schooling processes, we begin by discussing the study's methodological organization, explaining the method that helped us produce a reading of what may represent the contemporary school.

Method

Investigations of education, like works conducted in social sciences, are not free from social and historical contingencies whether in the constitution of their object or the theories related with it, which means that studies and such contingencies are always integrated in a particular scientific paradigm (cf. PEREIRA, 2010). In the public and media sphere, the debate about the meanings of schooling and youth has been gaining prominence. However, we have seen the emergence of a series of arguments with no empirical basis (ABRANTES, 2003), which underlines the importance of continuing to study the mediations between the youth world and the school world. Without overlooking this scenario, this study discusses an investigation based on the reality of youths and school; it was conducted using methods and techniques that are justified in the education field and consistent with the social-historical space we speak from.

Considering our goal to recognize youths' perceptions about secondary specialist arts education, we entered the empirical field with the authorization of an institution that offers this modality of education to conduct biographic interviews with their students. Thus, six interviews were conducted with students in the three years of secondary school. The youths were attending three different courses among the four offered by the institution, more specifically audiovisual communication, product design and artistic production; there was also one student who was, at the time, attending the general cycle, which corresponds to the tenth year. The interviews occurred at the school's facilities, with no interference by the school's agents during the talks. In the course of this work, citations of excerpts will use fictitious names.

Participants' ages ranged from 16 to 18 years old, and they were selected according to a variety of criteria, among which were gender, grade and academic achievement – we interviewed youths with various achievement levels. The interviews

explored the students' educational trajectory so that we could biographically situate the position and importance they attributed to attending secondary specialist arts education. We refer to trajectory in the sense conceptualized by Charlot (2009), who defines it as a succession of points corresponding to a student's steps within a given school context. This trajectory can be the object of an interpretation work which allows building a history. A student's history will be his trajectory when interpreted by someone, taking into account the three action times, which justifies the biographical approach we developed here.

In addition to the biographical interviews, the school's Educational Policy Plan (PPE) (dated 2012 and not included in the references for the sake of confidentiality) was added to the corpus of the study, since the questions pervading schooling dynamics and its impressions on students' lives are also, to some extent, subject to influence by educational policy. Therefore, it is important to consider the goals and effects of secondary education, in whatever modality, according to the discourses contained in official documents and respective legislation.

With regard to the characteristics of the school in question, it is of interest to know that it is situated in the city of Porto, in northern Portugal, with most of its students residing in the city's bordering municipalities. In the course of the article, the school will be referred to as the specialist arts school, a direct reference to the type of secondary education offered therein, which is the object of our study. For the sake of confidentiality, its name will not be disclosed. According to data from the PPE (2012), from 2008 to 2009, two thirds of the student population were from city's metropolitan area. Today, the school has approximately 950 students.

Our data analysis privileged content analysis techniques (BARDIN, 1977) with an emphasis on emerging categories. We followed Pereira's (2010) inference that content analysis allows a mediating interpretation, i.e., in a discovery context, it provides the investigator with the possibility to formulate theories or models based on a set of hypotheses that can emerge on different stages of the investigation.

Thus, we reached a category system that seeks to account for the different experiences narrated by the students, organizing them into a framework of categories and subcategories that were valued in relation to the study's conceptual problematization. The analytical model comprises six categories corresponding to different aspects of the relationship that the subjects conceive in their way of organizing the world, given their personal and school dispositions. In this article, we focus on one category: the school. The others, also commented on in the text, refer to family, identity, community, free time and projections for the future.

What is School?

Committed to noting the effects that school promotes on students' life, this study starts precisely from the representation its participants rendered of the institution. For we consider that analyzing effects implies going into the meanings that these actors, i.e., the students, attribute to school and their own action in this environment (cf. ABRANTES, 2003). The accounts of subjects in this study allow us to confirm a school conception

based on two arguments: learning and future. On the one hand, school is certainly the place where new things can be learned in different fields. This acknowledgement, which does not necessarily imply the question of taste or a mobilization toward lessons and knowledge (cf. CHARLOT, 2009), is represented, to a greater or lesser degree, in the accounts of every subject.

Beyond the acknowledgement that school is a place of learning, a fact that stands out in the students' accounts is that school is a place of education with a view to the future. The relationship established with learning is, in this case, one of expectations. Today's school life is what will allow the future to be configured as a better time; as a matter of fact, in this perspective, school is not only essential but also a milestone in that it is both a learning environment and a place for subsequent opportunities. It is noteworthy that the participants in this study imprint a meaning to their day-to-day school life, even though it also contains a *projective meaning* (ABRANTES, 2003). To these subjects, school is a period of their lives, a time in which identities and forms of socialization are built over the development of personal histories (PERRENOUD, 1995).

The conception of what school means also brings up other elements that allow contextualizing the roles of school action. Socialization is referred to as a key element, in such a way that it may also converge towards a coexistence for life. The same holds for learning, which may be carried out both in the educational relationship and in the coexistence with colleagues. Therefore, we can bring these views together and situate them in Canário's perspective, according to which "learning implies a triple relationship: with others, with the world and with oneself" (2005, p. 59), i.e., it is the articulation and inextricable connection between these elements that promotes – or not – meanings to that same learning. What we understand by learning can, moreover, build a game of relations that takes place in a wider space than that of school, which is why Canário (2005) underlines the need to confront the educational with the social.

We found that, to the students interviewed, school learning is essential and legitimizes knowledge. With regard to the learning relationship per se, it is worth highlighting that, within school, there are *others* who are responsible for our education. They have the huge responsibility to educate students for the future, in a conception that applies to how and why one learns.

Generally speaking, we found that school is, most of all, a place of learning, which can also come from colleagues; a space in which socialization processes occur; and, particularly, a place where we can set up the bases for opportunities that will culminate in a future. These opportunities, according to the participants, emerge in the figure of preparation, of knowledge as a tool to construct life. This is a formulation that does not depend on one's taste and appreciation for the work mobilized in the educational field, but dispenses with the acknowledgment that school is important. Thus, according to the youths interviewed, school is the future in that it is one of the factors of its unfolding. Some students even believe to some extent that there can only be a possible future for those who attend school.

What is the Place of Secondary Specialist Arts Education?

This is the investigation's central question: to youths, what does secondary specialist arts education mean within their educational trajectory? As with the use of narratives, we consider that the meanings emerging from secondary specialist arts education arise from a trajectory with past, present and future dispositions, in weaving whatever life project each of these students may have. Our effort implies interpreting and organizing a glance over the various effects that the option for this education modality converged in terms of meanings in the life stories narrated.

It is key to note that all interviewees consider that they chose by themselves to attend the secondary specialist arts modality. To some, this decision meant breaking with the family's educational ideology, whereas to others, entering secondary education took place in a field of expectations, but also of unawareness. One fact of interest is that none of the parents work in the chosen areas of study, although one father has some amateur experience in the field of arts – he paints. As to the families, the examples we saw which allowed us to infer an influence come from uncles, cousins and grandparents whose professions the students admired.

In any form the students relate with their families, whether through acceptance or fear, their secondary education option implies proceeding with their studies, which by itself demarcates a relationship of respect and understanding on the side of parents (SINGLY, 2007; SPERA; WENTZEL; MATTO, 2009). We should underline that almost half of these students' parents did not even reach secondary education, as can be seen in the table below.

Table 1 – Parents' Socioeconomic Structure

Student	Course	Mother		Father	
		Profession	Education	Profession	Education
Michele	Audio-visual Communication	Translator	Letters Degree	Business Owner	No Answer
Marcos	Audio-visual Communication	Geriatrician	9th Year	Triager	4th Year
Vinicius	Product Design	Merchant	Letters Degree	Merchant	12th Year
Maria	General Cycle (10th Year)	Nurse	Nursing Degree	Business Owner	Civil Engineering Degree
Alessandra	Artistic Production	Unemployed (Administrative)	9th Year	Administrative Staff	12th Year
Catarina	Product Design	Domestic Employee	4th Year	Electromechanics Technician	6th Year

Source: authors' own elaboration.

The distance between these students' choices and their parents' occupations evidences a context of renovation of prospects that may point to the fact that, in family trajectories, parents always project for their children to exceed them both in academic and professional terms (SINGLY, 2007). Thus, education would be legitimized as an instance of success. However, albeit in different areas, the fact that the course is in the arts niche caused some disagreement in configuring this educational decision.

The social peripherization of vocational courses is, in parents' vision, was replaced by the peripherization of the area of work, i.e., arts. It is clearly not the case of an association with the vocational school environment, whose stigma was to receive students disinterested in schooling and with poor grades (cf. ALVES, 1999), but, rather, the fact that engaging in arts studies makes parents fearful, particularly regarding professional prospects.

[...] because when I was in ninth grade, I really expected to go to arts in tenth grade, but what my parents were also telling me was that it'd be best for me to go to sciences (Marcos).

Among the students interviewed, two followed science at first, which might demonstrate the impact of negative family and social discourses about the arts field. The idea that only students with poor grades follow the arts path, which the youths reported as they described their parents' and even teachers' discourse, and the scarce professional opportunities in the context of the education provided, are the main arguments against following studies in this area. It is noteworthy that, in this generalized discourse, no distinction is made between the arts course that is offered in the scientific-humanistic modality (and is even more undervalued, according to the participants) and the one offered by the specialist arts school.

As mentioned earlier, there are four modalities of secondary education in Portugal. In the case of students interested in arts, it is possible to follow the scientific-humanistic path with a focus on arts or the specialist arts path. In the humanistic path, arts are a course option among many others, such as economic sciences or humanities, and the courses are distributed in schools across the country. In contrast, with the specialist arts path, there are only two institutions offering this modality, and all courses at these schools are vocational in arts. What our study shows is that, in the youths' vision, the specialist institutions possess a better infrastructure and enjoy greater social prestige. Thus, to the students who found support or respect for their choice to follow the specialist arts school path, motivation is always associated with a perception of quality, leadership and fame about the institution they entered. A marked distinction from scientific-humanistic courses focusing on arts:

To begin with, my school's name does [have a great weight], it's a great name [...] it's natural that we're well prepared to work in artistic environments, so I think future employers will value that aspect. (Michele).

When confronted with the possibility that they might have chosen secondary scientific-humanistic, arts-focused education, the youths are very incisive: there were no guarantees or recognition as to the quality that was offered. On the other hand, the prestige associated to the name of the school these students chose points to what Antunes and Sá (2012) describe as "sanctuaries of excellence", defined as spaces capable of providing more consistent trajectories and more rewarding professional futures.

Another important aspect in choosing the specialist path is related with the expectation about change. After admission, the experience and expectations are slowly

and progressively confronted with the reality of attending the specialist arts school, and the quality that was sought takes on concrete dimensions. These students firmly keep their representation of an organized institution, they recognize that there is a teaching model based on informality and flexibility in managing classes, but a new component grows stronger in the education context: stress.

Studying at a specialist arts school demands time, dedication and, therefore, a harsh break with social life. If, on the one hand, the informality of methods and the relationship between teachers and students occupies the centrality in how work is conducted, on the other, the institution involves an exhaustive work demand whose assessment basis is no different from other schools, except in cases when it is even more demanding. This phenomenon, as Abrantes (2003) notes with regard to “excellence schools”, would replace the validity of a double hierarchy (i.e., school and youth) by means of school demands combined to pressure and control over adolescents, thus reconfiguring indiscipline problems in the form of stress and stigmatization.

We go in at 8:30 a.m. and leave at 6:30 p.m. I have a 45-minute lunch break on Mondays and Fridays. It's all just assignments, presentations, projects and, like I said, it's a dog's life. (Alessandra).

Students at the specialist arts school are unanimous, they lack time. Still, they inscribe themselves into a logic of investing in the school, facing school work stress and the respective negative effects, such as poor grades, mental fatigue and physical symptoms. In general, they show themselves satisfied to be able to cope with the demand and some pride in saying they can make school life and personal life converge:

I was, I didn't think it would be so, that disciplines would be so tiring, that it would be so hard, but I found the environment lighter. (Maria).

We have a very busy schedule and long school hours, even for disciplines of technical drawing and technologies, which don't exist in other secondary arts schools, but I still have a good social life. (Vinicius).

This pride reveals a logic of responding to parents' and teachers' pressure by taking on the *good student* model. Only a few students develop silent ways of resisting school in order to overcome the suffering they are exposed to during the process that makes youths socially satisfied (cf. COCKAIN, 2011).

The learning environment, recognized as *light*, ensures them school days that are, to some extent, mildly conducted. This makes the learning context pleasant, and one can see a pervasive movement in terms of the relationships with school colleagues. Although there are difficulties and group break-ups, the school's identity does produce some effect on how the various interrelations organize themselves in the educational context. Just like in the work of Rich and Schachter (2012), we note that certain characteristics of the school environment collaborate for developing an identity. We refer, in particular,

to educative dynamics in which the teacher emerges as an interested or involved subject or a role model, as well as the existence of a school program focusing on the student as a plural subject. These characteristics have a major relevance from the students' perspective:

Yes, I really like being here. The environment is good and the teachers also support students when they have doubts. We have a school email, which helps a lot when we're home. Teachers reply as soon as they can. (Maria).

Another factor highlighted in students' narratives, one that ensures satisfaction with the environment, concerns the school's infrastructure. To them, the secondary specialist arts school possesses the best materials, thus ensuring them the necessary support to acquire resources, which, in addition to a well-prepared body of teachers, provides a unique experience. This specialist apparatus, typical of excellence schools (cf. ANTUNES; SÁ, 2010) is described in the very PPE (2012) of the school we investigated. According to the document, a 2007 resolution by the Council of Ministers allowed a school facilities modernization program, in addition to providing, in the process, a set of technical means that meet contemporary functionality standards.

Among the effects the school promotes on students' lives is something denominated a "spirit of the secondary specialist arts school" (Vinicius). It is a conduct that is friendly, respectful, dedicated to work and which values difference. Arts education students recognize themselves as part of a whole that is not common to the entire society; it differs, in style and attitude, from the other youth groups, and thus, even with different concepts about various subjects, their integration at school is promoted in a logic that is primarily based on respect for diversity, a characteristic the youths value.

It is worth highlighting that, in the framework of goals proposed by the PPE (2012) of the institution these students attend, emphasis is placed on an educative function based on transmitting and creating dialogue values, and capable of managing identity processes guided by critical reflectiveness and creativity, within a proposition of social action in line with respect for diversity. The discourse enshrined in the PPE, which reflects in students' accounts, also allows us to speak of an education that shares goals essential for a citizenly education, a purpose that Stoer (2008) feared was compromised by the promotion of a neoliberal education ideology.

One must keep in mind that the students who participated in this investigation have a sense of belonging that refers to the arts, and the arts underlie the identity they corroborate in daily life, it is a mark that relates to a present experience, a past wish, and an attitude they intend to imprint on the future. It is in secondary specialist arts school that these youths can fully live their identity, which also helps them perceive the desire to participate in this education project rather than in another. In line with Canário's (2005) appeal, we would say that it is key to perceive school as part of a social context, so that its dynamics can propagate beyond school's walls, avoiding what the author calls a "pedagogical illusion", in which learning and coexistence conditions end up restricted to the endogenous field.

[Do you know the schools that provide secondary education in arts? Have you never been interested?] No. [Why?] Because they were ordinary course schools that everybody went, mixed with other courses, other people, other styles, and this one has always been the one that appealed to me most. I never considered the possibility. (Alessandra, p. 25).

The students' discourse expresses, to some extent, the satisfaction to be able to be someone regardless of their choices. Outside the school's walls, a greater deal of work may still be required so they can take on their positions without being confronted because of their style, i.e., the common features that define this young group's sense of belonging (PAIS, 1993; ABRANTES, 2003; SILVA, 2010). Meanwhile, it is in secondary specialist arts school that the students share the value of difference, in a process of becoming conscious by means of an education that modifies. This is clear evidence that youth invades school and becomes a potentizing element of school dynamics (cf. PAIS, 1993).

Arts education, according to the students, makes one think differently. In its interactional dimension, the school transgresses the barriers of formal, and makes all the educational actors share a philosophy of respect which does not come ready-made. It is the experience in the environment that transforms the spirit and makes students realize their identities and respect the other's manifestation. It is a space of little but not inexistent interactional confrontation. Let us remember that youths divide themselves in subgroups, and while we acknowledge that the teachers' educational work is different and, according to the students, a break with their previous school experience, there are negative aspects. These less positive experiences can, in our view, become critical learning processes, helping youths to lessen the social barriers they face out of the school, along with other young groups, for example.

To the interviewees, the negative aspects result in problems precisely when one of the actors fails to perceive himself within the school spirit in effect, which can mean the use of improper methods, excessive demand or a bad relationship management.

I think that teacher hasn't been able to captivate students in any way, and he's even been making things 'interesting' by creating projects with ridiculous deadlines for the amount of work it is. (Marcos).

Based on a global view that we built by intercrossing the students' accounts, we can say that youths attending secondary specialist arts school are happy about their choice. There is, however, some regret connected to future expectations. The fact that there is much demand concerning school work causes some of them to see a decline in grades, which worries them, as their performance can interfere with their academic trajectory. In any case, the hope that they are acquiring specialist and general knowledge at a renowned school makes them imagine a more promising future. It is an ambivalence in the education field in which schools must deal with the innovation and flexibilization of school dynamics while having to respond to an educational discourse heavily focused on classification (cf. ABRANTES, 2003).

Final considerations

One interpretation of the effects that the Portuguese secondary arts specialist path can have on students' lives requires organizing our thoughts so that the subjects' history gains relevance as a construct that considers the three times in their trajectories. However, we must consider that we cannot access the meanings of these effects if the school dynamics which combine in school's everyday life be left aside (cf. ABRANTES, 2003).

The effort to understand the regularities and singularities formed in the lives of youths attending secondary education implies acknowledging the many faces that school can represent in its interweaving with personal dimensions, in a movement in which identity development reflects the changes in the various socialization processes adolescents are exposed to (cf. VAN ZANTEN, 2000; PAIS, 2002; BARBOSA, 2007).

In analyzing this article, the reader must keep in mind that its design imposes a few limitations, which do not nullify the validity of data or the interpretation of results, but prevent them from being taken in certain generalized ways. In particular, it is necessary to consider the notion of school trajectory we used, as well as the prominence of the students' discourse, in virtue of a methodological framework involving narratives. Thus, what we present here is not the portrait of secondary specialist arts school, but a possible portrait rendered through students' voice.

The narratives built in this work reveal subjects who, over the years, gradually fomented their school experiences, experiencing moments of greater or lesser disposition regarding the school, in a process intermediated by the participation of parents, friends, family and educative agents. Over time, these subjects' worldview underwent changes the consequences of which also implied different ways of thinking about school and education. The organization of this school-connected discourse allows to affirm that maintaining the desire for what was being learned was the driving force in those who were closest and disposed to viewing the educative space as a plan of life.

It is in secondary education that school experience will allow the development of milestones that will justify a proximal, voluntary adherence to school, as expressed in these students through the fullness of their desire. These youths' project of self begins to call for more real and concrete forms based on a motivation that emerges from the encounter between their educative expectations and the deconstruction of rigid forms and methods that impose an institutional character on school, in a detour that prevents education from being perceived as a dynamic between subjects, thus valuing the core of norm- and guideline-ruled activities.

However, secondary specialist arts education does not emerge as an ideal or perfect plan. There are cracks that pervade its pedagogical practices in much the same way as with other schools and education paths. Nevertheless, we underline the potential of specialist school to deconstruct hierarchization in school processes (cf. TEIXEIRA; FLORES, 2010), so as to allow learning environments that are flexible, informal and innovative. These features are highly appreciated by the students (cf. ABRANTES, 2003; RICH; SCHACHTER, 2012) and make them admire the way classes and the communication between the different educative actors are made possible.

Apart from the expanded conception of what school is and how its work is received in the social field, the students underline the idea that, for all the horizontal treatment they experience by means of flexible relationships, there is a strict disposition in how assignments and tests are proposed. Thus, they reveal the exhaustive logic of those schools considered as excellence niches (ANTUNES; SÁ, 2010). To the interviewees, it is worth to overcome this challenge because of the school's repute. Succeeding in this institution promotes future recognition.

Here, these youths' projection for the future points us to the meanings and objectives of secondary education. The great concern in relation to educative ideologies aimed at meeting a market logic (cf. ALVES, 1999; CORREIA, 2000; BARROSO, 2003; ALVES, 2006, STOER, 2008) still proves a current issue because, although the school is making an effort to set up new horizons and perspectives to the work carried out in its space, youths continue to project a relationship of correspondence between school dynamics and material achievement, whether in an academic form or a representation of the job market.

In any case, we can see that specialist arts school has not only a "projective meaning" (ABRANTES, 2003), it also enriches and potentizes students' identities (cf. RICH; SCHACHTER, 2012) as it deconstructs a formal character of the educative field and shifts the focus of its pedagogical proposal to hypotheses of being. Thus, the challenge that emerges for these youths resides in the social field. It is necessary to be able to be also outside school. Therefore, faced with uncertainty and unpredictability, they struggle to leave marks, innovate and carry out an integration movement, all of which are processes articulated in function of the meanings that secondary specialist arts education foments to them.

I think that [secondary specialist arts education] makes us open our eyes in a way, because we are practically a community apart from society. And I think we, although we're different, it teaches us, specialist education teaches us that we're part of society, although we're different, we're part of it. (Catarina).

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