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Time to pretend! A *performative* way in which youth negotiate their identities in their everyday life at schools

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide some discussion about how young people negotiate their identities in their everyday life at schools. Moreover we'll discuss it in matters if their relationship with the processes of formal education, can and should also be understood from their varied forms of sociability and performative practices of their daily lives. The main focus is to explore the use of performance, in everyday analysis of the students, particularly in its dimensions of identity making in non-formal or informal contexts as a contribution to think about citizenship education at schools. Drawing from data of an ethnographic study with high school students, we'll try to highlight and reveal something about these social actors and their actions in everyday life at school in a performative dimension as a way to negotiate their identities in relation to themselves, to youth culture and to school culture. The data suggest that emphasizing youth performances as student's social activities allow us to understand the complexity of performing identities as a way to explore their everyday life experiences at schools. Further, with these findings we'll try to establish a dialogue between the theoretical framework and the in-depth study the processes of schooling in a matter of performing youth as pretended identities. In doing so, we'll try to provide another perspective to formal and informal experiences of students and their performative acts in the sense that such acts could establish another framework for citizenship education.

Keywords: *performance, performativity, schooling, citizenship, youth, identity*

Introduction

With this paper we intent to highlight the importance of thinking and interpreting the everyday life of students at schools with the lens of performance and performativity and how they try to struggle and negotiate their daily life of school as students, youngsters and citizens. In doing this we'll try to explore the core of crisis, controversies and challenges that we have nowadays in relation to these subjects at our daily life as teachers, trainers of future teachers and as a researchers. This discussion will be taken from the data of an ethnographic fieldwork for about two years with several groups of young students of Portuguese high school and their social interactions in non-formal contexts of school everyday life.

The first section of the paper establishes the social and historical frameworks of citizenship and schooling, in a broader sense the tries to make a brief discussion about

the concepts of in debate, such as citizenship, civility and civic culture. The second section we present the sensitizing concepts relevant to our argumentation. Finally, in the third section we briefly present some ideas about how the students in performing identities could furnish us other routes and maybe another framework to citizenship education at schools and in societies.

Schooling and citizenship – two sides of the same coin

One of the characteristics the concept of schooling and citizenship is that they are dynamic, unstable, and we always need to think on them in the context of social and historical constrains, possibilities and limitations of their production all overtimes. We have to analyse them within the long-established relationship between the nation-state and 'its' school. In doing so, we'll constantly re-framing them in terms or of their crisis, either their controversies and or even their possibilities of challenging us to think different. Mass schooling state-supervised has long been recognized as the way by which nation-states turn children into citizens or individuals into political persons. These narrow link have been established since the appearance of modern societies and the rationale of modernity and continuously settled the basis for the 'national *conscience collective*' (Bauman, 2004 p.2) and in a broadly sense the interconnectedness with the mass schooling and a definition of a national identity in all modern states (cf. Meyer et all. 1992). In sum since the nineteenth century that the link between citizenship-nation-schools exists; in short the nation-state and the mass-schooling born and developed from the beginning of that times and the school was (and in other terms still is) the tool that help to imagine the new communities – the nation-states (Anderson, 1991) and in somehow helped them to produce citizens and citizenship. Nowadays, they're still producing citizens, but no longer transmitting simplistic messages of nationalism; in other terms their messages have become more subtle and sophisticated, concerned with other themes and focus that establish other agendas to citizenship education.

With these new agendas, and with other thoughts about citizenship, we could go further that these straight interconnectedness and say that Civil society comprises, a space of uncoerced human associations and a set of relational networks (social movements; churches, political parties, schools...) (Walzer, 1992). The essence of these institutions, along the history, had a multi-centred contribution to a democratic civil society with a style of self-governance through a large number of different uncoordinated processes. 'A democratic civil society is one controlled by its members, not through a single process of self-determination, but through a large number of different and uncoordinated processes' (Walzer, 1992, p. 105).

Nevertheless, schools always have a difficult relation to uncoordinated processes. It was always easier for school actors to think empirically than in theory, more in terms of tools than in terms of a device. In schools and for their actors, most of the times, when they talk about a citizenship crisis, often they are talking about a school crisis; and if we have a school crisis certainly we'll be facing a citizenship crisis.

In sum, thinking about crisis of citizenship and schools is to think about the beginning of school as institution, like others institutions, and is to think about the birth of the

“imagined communities” that B. Anderson (1991) talked about. In saying that, for us, the controversies and at the same time the challenge is to think on these concepts – schooling and citizenship, as social spaces where the game of education and civility, as in others spaces, takes place.

Identity, youth and performance – three of a kind

Identity, youth and performance are concepts with many interpretations within many fields of study, and for the purposes of this paper they are the sensitizing concepts to understand how we could establish the framework from our main argument in this reflection. In sociological and anthropological thought, they’ve been seen in relation within institutions and with agents in forms of legitimacy of some subject(s) or persons involved in a dynamic shift of cultures or societies, in other words they’re all concepts that always must be framed in the socio-historic context which is (re)produced.

Identity

Identity is commonly associated to crisis. In what concerns to youngsters, the anthropological, sociological and psychological traditions often associated this concept to the transformations throughout the adolescence. This straight relation frequently conducted us to say that identity could be the major concern of days of youth changes. Although that association isn’t a wrong one, the concept of identity in social sciences as a wider spectrum of analysis and many fields of research than those mentioned earlier. In this sense, identity has the triple challenge or risk of trusting ourselves, the others (social-identity) and on society too (cultural-identity) (Bauman, 2001).

For the purposes of this paper, identity is something that all actors need to frame and reframe it continuously, it’s a game freely chosen, a dramatic presentation of the self (Kellner, 1992). If in the beginning of modern times, identity seems to was something that everyone had to fix it and keep it solid an stable, nowadays it seems we think about identity as something we have to recycle it and re-frame it. In other terms, when we think about identity we don’t know for sure to where we’re we belong (Bauman, 1993). It look likes, we don’t know for sure which way to choose or how we must act between the variety of models and styles that surround us.

Identities are constructed both historically and contingent, situated unlike naturalization processes that seek to carry on some of these identity constructions of the subject. The social and cultural identities are always changing historically, remaking itself and remaking social and cultural reality in which these processes occur. These remaking of identities could be seen as a sign of agency and with a potential for change. Thus ‘identities can be remade’ emphatically moment by moment produced, or indeed performed.

Youth

Another sensitizing concept in this paper is youth, that could be ‘nothing but a word’ (Bourdieu, 1978), or as T. Popkewitz (2012) recently suggested ‘as process of fabrication of a subject’, or even a social construction (Lesko, 2001). In other authors opinions, the understanding of youth could be done in the terms of their cultures or (Feixa, 1999), in relation to their modes of producing different ways of living (McLeod & Yates, 2006; Miles, 2000). Despite all these ways of making subjects in what matters to youth as a sensitizing concept, nonetheless, and for the purposes of this paper, we understand it as a living word in living places with living persons. Of course in doing this, we’re advocating all theoretical tradition that embraced by the anthropology of experience (cf. Turner, 1986).

Since the middle of the twentieth century, we start to pay attention more carefully to those persons in schools and in societies as social players and actors. In doing so we tried to understand in what ways they interact within every specific socio-cultural context; why and what are their specific interests; what are their styles and their relations to their regimes of actions; how they frame their subjectivities and how they create them; and in what terms they related their ways of living and the constructing of their everyday lives.

In that process of living the so-called days of youth, they spend their time (not in the sense of Kronos time, God of the linear time, but in the sense of Kairotic time, God of the opportunistic time, the time of uncertainty) trying to be someone in their own terms in different places, in different groups, in different institutions or in different cultures that aren’t those ones. In sum, they’re always trying to frame their identities, in other words they established the performances as a way to perform their identities.

Saying this we must clarify why we bring for this dialogue the concept of performance, and in what terms that concept could be an important one to citizenship education.

Performance

Performance in the social sciences, in a narrower sense, it is situated as an activity symbolic or aesthetic, while rituals, development activities ‘folk’ and theatrical productions that are represented in local and specific. These studies generally focuses on the structure of these events, the means by which they hereby (cause or effect) and its relations with the social context. On the other hand, performance can be also understood from the work within the symbolic interactionism school of thought, mainly the studies developed by E. Goffman (1959, 1967); and in this case, the focus is more upon the expressivity in the processes of strategic management of the prints and structured improvisation, through which humans articulate their purposes in their interactions in everyday life.

If the first reading of the work on the performance, she will appear as part of a drama scenes with complex meanings and senses (meanings) arising from cultural and social contexts in which they’re developed, moving closer to the theoretical references of V. Turner (1992) and R. Schechner (2005). The second reading, research on performance can take as themes of study, since their cognitive aspects, presentation of signals (in the phenomenological sense of the term) to the development of scenes and thereby making

visible the implicit narrative structures that will evoke its size, in sum in the sense of performance or performativity. This is well located on the border of creativity and improvisation at the time it is placed in public by social actors, it is the "... expressive dimension of the strategic articulation of the practice" (Schiffellin 1998: 199).

The purpose on emphasize the concept of performance as a social activity 'in vivo' helps us in highlight the complexity of the performances of the students themselves and their forms of living and learning the civic culture of the different contexts that they pass through their everyday life.

Another meaning that can be given to the concept of performance is the one that derives from theories developed by J. L. Austin (1976) – theory of speech acts – which tells us that when we speak, not only describe the world as we act upon it, we do things. There will be two-way so we use the words, the usual way of speaking and performative: the first describes a state, and it is true or false, while a second is the action to which it refers and which is neither true nor false, functional or not.

The notion of performativity assumes then an importance in the production of discourses that students carry on their daily experiences, but both in the speeches that are made about them. In particular, more specifically in studies with a focus on post-structuralists ideas, the performative dimension acquires more significance in analyzing the actions of the actors and putting the emphasis on bringing out the theoretical discussion about the performance, issues of identity and own nature of the subjects (Kholi, 1999).

To think about the social world as a performative one, is to think it theatrically, or dramaturgically (Goffman, 1959). In that sense, we are always producing images to others and need to make efforts in sustaining the self. The act of communication is permanent, intentionally or not; it's an act bodily impregnated where we have to manage our impressions persistently. The performances are always directed for audiences that are in the different scenes in where we perform. In those different scenes sometimes we perform in front stages – the scenes itself, and othertimes we prepare our performances on back stages.

In other sense the actions and interactions of the social actors are always acts of performativity. These can be seen in the field of "extra energy" (Rostas, 1987, cit in. Freeland & Hughes, 1998), and as the full expressions that some puts in their own performative acts. In this case, the expressiveness (and performativity) emerges as something that is inherent in all human activity in everyday life, causing an effect on others whether we like it or not. Every action has an expressive dimension, reveals something about the actors and the situation.

At this expressive dimension in which the articulation of the strategies of the actors takes place with practice E. Schiefflin (1998) designates performativity. This is so located in the field of creativity and the border of the moment improvisation is placed in public.

With a slightly different approach J. Butler (1990) establishes the basis of the concept of 'gender performativity' – examining the constitution of the gender of the subject through performative acts involved in chains of socio-historical conventions. To her,

heteronormativity gender is constituted by rules produced in societies that control the sex of individuals and that, for that constantly need to be repeated and repeated to give the effect of the substance, natural. These effects are performative, that is, they have the power to produce what names and thus reiterate the gender norms. These are rules that operate when ordering the incorporation of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, these ideals that relate mostly to the idealization of heterosexual relationship (Butler, 1993).

Schools as places of performances – performing identities

In what matters to schools, these days are one, among others, of time and space where youngsters seems to make sense that there are other ways of being, of thinking, but are also the time of illusion and imagination, where the dream to be what they want to be, be what they want and usually where they have the feeling of doing the things they want in how they want. In these supposedly enjoyment of the extraordinary time and timely, fleeing the sequential linear time that the school proposed is to provide them a certain sense of belonging. In this seizing the day, or enjoying the Kairotic time of youth, school is a perfect place for Performances take place, and in that place, using that sense of time – the students perform their Identities and at the same time they always performing culture (Dimitriadis, 2005).

Identity as performance is a complex concept full of ambiguities. Whether it is about ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, ideology or others, performing identity is like a shifting mosaic or composite in flux that needs to be changed every so often. Applying to youngsters, performativity is where they pretend to write their own identities, where they exercise the power to create and to transform and re-write their sense of citizenship. Either on their t-shirts where there is much more than the literal sense of the sentence 'friends with benefits', but is place where they perform gender; or simply posing in some manners that challenged the audience – they managed the impressions to their groups and above all they don't lose their face to their mates.

Affiliations and associations within the social and cultural identities are then built up around the choices made and each particular mix has his luggage. Categories and stereotypes that are continuously changing and being modified by the forces of identity brands are simultaneously present where labelling continues to hold strong. Identities are then created from the constant repetition of certain acts incorporated. These acts are performative because the essence or identity that intend to manufacture, are sustained by bodily signs and other discursive means. The performance is governed by rules that establish how youth should act.

Social institutions 'create' rules and norms to regulate and create a civic culture in social actors. But if these "regulatory standards" don't be repeated often maybe the social actors twists and lapses during those proceedings (where the performances occur). In an opposite way youngsters often use their bodies with a sense of unconformity to the rules that govern them; never completely adhering to the rules they impose their materialization. The performance of the bodies is then assumed as a continuous

reinvention, for this we need to understand the youth performance and how they seek to adapt their bodies, their sexuality and gender, in sum reinventing them.

For youth, schools are then good places where the effect of each performance of identity is a redefinition of meaning, a shift of emphasis and a relocation of focus. In this sense, Identity becomes more about the verb than the noun – the doing more than the labelling. Requires personal resources for performing identity (appearance; management impressions; authentic or pretending to; dress codes; body performing on ways of moving, walking, talking, creating cliques; insinuating the bodies (cool, hard, hype, counter-culture,...) – in other words, pretending to be cool.

But the authentic display of cool for the members of our 'gang', requires great efforts to appear has authentic as the opposite to a 'poser'. These means a great deal of face-work in front stages to all of the audiences. Sometimes means detachment of the more conventional rules and trying to create their own rules, even if they appear to be contradictory to the civic culture prevailed, so they have to perform in places of conformity, ruled by the principles of coordinated processes and networks of peoples and groups that aren't those ones.

On writing their own identities impregnated with performativity, they pretend to make accordance with their liberty and capacity to craft an identity that they think they will enjoy and will perform its task effectively without losing their faces to everyone that matters (group, culture, society...). In this sense, seems like they are fated to pretend. The performance is so well played that seems natural, but that is the consequence of the process of performing identities as a hard stuff to learn (trial and error). On the other hand, sometimes they enter in "over-performance" and they seem to fail and disrupt the social order and in some sense the civilities as well (commitment to a certain interaction order is multiple – micro-style).

Performing identity, involves finding a moment of delicate balance between luck and opportunities of contemporary life and identification with some story where linear time crosses an opportune time.

In the end, in-between the mainstream and the conformity to themselves, to their fellows or group(s), to the codes and 'cliques' of the social game, or at school where civility and civic culture is always happening, and the underground or counterculture project of themselves, performance and performativity emerge as an emancipatory way of how students negotiate their everyday life at schools and, in complement, at societies.

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