

Learning From Research in Different Contexts: The Role of Telling Life Histories in Humanities

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The issues involved in educational research become more and more complex as each year and new world events unfold. The intricacies of what really is going on in any research setting demand a constant reexamination of our goals and our methods. The authors of this article are teacher researchers especially interested in supporting the learning of children and adults in their authentic cultural and historical contexts. We are committed to observing, documenting, and learning from the way adults and children interact in learning situations. The adults are teachers, parents or adult family members of young children. The children we participate with and observe are in early childhood programs and elementary schools. This interaction of the adults and children that is really the basis of sociological and psychological study by many experts, to us is even more involved than cognitive learning, social and emotional development, and language development—it is all of these. And always the whole is more than the parts. And always there is expected and unexpected learning. How can we possibly capture it? We believe that by telling and documenting life histories in qualitative research we begin the journey to authenticity.

In communities and schools all over the world, issues of education are becoming very complex. Power and access to all types of knowledge, resources, and education are huge issues. There is an emphasis on preserving unique cultural traditions and at the same time an emphasis on globalization on many levels. There is also renewed emphasis on maintaining cultural identity and native language within a pluralistic society. While there is an increasing global interdependence, there are increasing inequities, socially, economically, and culturally. Across the world, issues which combine history and culture, traditions, and attempts at new understandings of current and future society are complex and difficult. These complexities affect all people and all aspects of life. They affect diplomats and economists at the highest levels and they affect the learning and development of young children and the adults who nurture them.

Our cultural, human roots that we pass on to children are no longer neatly contained within borders. Human community, history, and politics have become more

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and more complex over the past decades. According to Clandinin and Connelly (1996), stories are the nearest we can get to experience, as we tell of our experiences: the act of our telling our stories seems “*inextricably linked with the act of making meaning, an inevitable part of life in a ...postmodern world*” and only becomes problematic “*...when its influence on thinking and perception goes unnoticed*” or is ignored (Goldstein, 1997, p. 147). In this article, we briefly present the frameworks which guided the research contexts in two countries—the United States of America and Brazil; then the article analyzes the research developed by the two authors in these different contexts, sharing questions and reflections arisen on the road that evolves during the process.

Each context illustrates the specificities and challenges of the fieldwork. It is worth explaining that the discussions concern not only the data, but perhaps more importantly, the learning achieved in the research process in the United States and in Brazil. This learning happened among the small insights tempered with the ambiguities and contradictions faced. In the end, we have analyzed the findings in relation to what we have learned as researchers and the challenges we continue to face in our quest to more authentically document the learning of adults and children.

Theoretical Frameworks Focusing on Language, Storytelling and Learning

In research developed in United States, the stories concern immigrant and refugee families, in community settings and schools; in research developed in Brazil, the stories concern children and adults of different social classes and geographical origins in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. How do we structure our methods of educational research to most authentically document and analyze the data of the learning contexts and the strengths and needs of learners?

Our research commitment involves finding what is lost when people are transformed into objects and people’s own histories are forgotten. This means observing such people being reconstituted as subjects and reconstituting their culture and history in the process, listening to whatever could not be expressed, taking into account what was left out. One of the researchers used critical theory as a framework and the other used the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (1968, 1988, 2000) and Walter Benjamin (1987a, 1987b) who are both related to critical theory.

For example, in the United States context the researcher used critical literacy, an aspect of critical theory, combined with study of various culturally based art forms, to address the issues the participants face in an integrated and participatory way. This

critical framework for research focuses on the most important questions in literacy, learning, teaching, education, and living: Whose stories are important? Which stories can we learn from? Whose background knowledge will we respect and include? Whose and which knowledge is power? Luis Moll (1994) declares that “*funds of knowledge*” of all families in our communities must be recognized and built upon.

Critical social theory and critical pedagogy were popularized by the late Paulo Freire. According to Freire (1997), freedom can only occur when the oppressed reject the image of oppression “... *and replace it with autonomy and responsibility*” (p. 29). Those who adopt Freire's pedagogy must be aware that it is not made up of techniques to transform the world. Instead, he felt that “...*the progressive educator must always be moving out on his or her own, continually reinventing me and reinventing what it means to be democratic in his or her own specific cultural and historical context*” (Freire, 1997, p. 308). Freire's work has given education a language to discuss the effect of oppression on people and their ability to intervene on their own behalf.

Freire (1973) was influenced by the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory in the 1920s which advocated that all new learning be based on personal experience in a way that encourages critical reflection and action. An assumption was that all learning must include active participation. Critical social theory, which has grown out of critical theory, encourages the production and application of theory as a part of the overall search for transformative knowledge. Leonardo (2004) acknowledges that it is “...*Freire's work that promotes ideology critique, an analysis of culture, attention to discourse, and a recasting of the teacher as an intellectual or cultural worker*” (p. 12). This theoretical frame guided the research developed in the United states.

Although different forms of critical social theory may debate the nature of oppression—such as economics in Marxism, discourse in Foucaultian analysis, gender in feminism, or race in critical race theory—they unite in the idea that social inequality is persistent and it subverts learners' full learning potential. Thus, critical social theorists are not in the habit of justifying that oppression exists, but prefer describing the form it takes. Said (2000) prefers the phrase “*historical experience*” because it is not esoteric (therefore accessible) but not without its theoretical moorings that a critical social theorist like Said proceeds to unpack.

This framework converges with the theoretical perspectives of Russian philosopher and literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin and of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin. These theorists contribute to our understanding of the relationships between

language, history and culture. Both thinkers examine conceptions of art, habit, tradition, and language and explore the tensions between experience and language. Benjamin questions the extent to which our experience of the modern world is compatible with the forms that are used to make sense of that experience. The theoretical frame is one where life histories are considered as a collective memory of the past, a critical awareness of the present and a premise for the future guides the research. (Kramer, 1993).

Both researchers strongly believe that all of us must consistently reflect on our work and our convictions. This constant clarification of our own values and action in all areas of pluralistic work with students is the ongoing aim of education. We see this clarification as Freire (1984) does when he defines conscientization (based on the Brazilian conscientização), as "*the process by which human beings participate critically in a transforming act*" (p. 106). Therefore, the world can be seen as a community of learners which reflect characteristics of the many contexts from which students come and the global community where we all struggle to live together peacefully.

Throughout our careers, we have maintained strong assumptions about human potential. Philosophically and in the area of learning and teaching, we have been drawn to critical theory. This framework holds as tenants: 1) the importance of all participants in a learning event to draw upon personal and cultural histories in participation, 2) the importance of multiple sources of knowledge, and 3) the importance of all learning leading to transformative action. Besides, we have always been concerned about guaranteeing an ambience, a safe place, where everybody can be active and creative. Politically, we believe that if things seem impossible or unachievable, this is not a reason not to fight for them. As researchers, we assume that it is important to understand how the macro influences the micro events and vice versa; listening to teachers' stories and experience is fundamental to comprehend their professional trajectories, and as language constitutes conscience, researchers and teachers must talk about their teaching and learning pedagogical practice.

According to Bakhtin (1988), the production and reception of meaning is what truly constitutes language. Language has dialogical and ideological dimensions, which are historically determined. Every word has intentions, meanings; to understand the discourse (the written or spoken text) the context must be understood. Comprehension implies not only the identification of a language by formal and normative signs, but also by the sub-texts, the intentions that are not explicit. We do not pronounce mere words, but we speak about good or bad things, agreeable or disagreeable situations. Discourse always has a live

meaning and direction and words contain values and ideological forces: here lies the historical approach of language. On the other hand, meaning implies community: one always addresses someone, and someone does not assume a passive role; the interlocutor takes part in the meaning of the utterance. Bakhtin (1988) understands that language is social; language is essential to human existence, to mankind. To his theory, it is not experience that organizes expression; indeed, expression precedes and organizes experience, gives it form and direction.

As Bakhtin (2000) points out, the human sciences are the sciences of humans in their specificity, not the sciences of voiceless or natural phenomenon. Because humans, in their human specificity, is always expressing themselves (speaking), creating a text (though it may remain *in potentia*). Therefore, we are not dealing with the human sciences if we study human beings outside of the text and independently of it. Todorov (1981, 1984) stresses that, to Bakhtin, communication is meaning.

Another important theoretical reference to the research framework we find in philosophical ideas of Walter Benjamin, particularly in his concept of experience. Benjamin discusses the decay of the art of storytelling in the modern world:

the storyteller is a man who knows how to give advice. But if today counseling is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, it is because communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence, we have no counseling either for ourselves or for others. Counseling is rather to give someone suggestions to the continuity of a story that is being told than to answer a question. In order to get this suggestion, one need to have the art of telling; besides one can only accept a suggestion if he is able to tell his own story. Counsel woven into the living substance of the existence has a name: wisdom. The art of storytelling is declining because wisdom - the 'epic side of truth' - is vanishing. (1987a, p.200).

Benjamin emphasizes the importance of remembering and the role of the historian and, we could say, of the researcher. History is not a linear sequence but something encompassing past, present and future. History is something that can be told. Man creates himself by creating the world, and he becomes himself through language. Language, as Bakhtin also considers, is a social production. Understanding requires a shared experience: *storytelling gives life to the storyteller, like the clay on the hands of the worker* (1987a, p. 205). Benjamin wants to recognize the intensity of the historical time, not its chronology. Time is not connected points in a chronological order, history is an object fulfilled with 'nows'. He asks: "*Can't you hear the echoes of the silent voices of the past?*" (1987a, p. 223).

To recall the past means to have a different understanding of history. Past is important to review present, to put it in critical condition, to provide it with new meaning. Human history is based on this discontinuity; only human beings have a history and therefore language is needed. As man is generated by culture as well as he produces culture, he is able to make the history and to tell the story. We can therefore rethink the past to give another meaning to history and to the future; we can question present time. On the other side, in Benjamin's writings there are two very important characters: the collector and the chronicler. "*The chronicler describes the events without any distinction between the important and the insignificant ones; everything that happens is important to history.*" (1987a, p. 223). In order to investigate human interactions, that is, in order to collect, a dialectic relation between order and disorder should be established. Clarice Lispector, one of the most important writers of Brazilian literature, says: "*it is in the search, not in the finding that I can get the unknown, the strangeness that I can recognize*" (1986, p.172).

As teacher researchers, we believe that it is important to listen and to observe considering both sense and sensibility, in order to understand history and the events. The critical theory helps us to see culture in a different way, helps to grasp another relationship and to perceive ambiguities.

Being Teachers and Being Researchers: Challenges in the Field

Presenting the contexts of research projects in both countries, we begin with the qualitative studies developed in the United States which documented various groups of teacher education students' work as they journeyed through their own teacher development process in literacy and curriculum development work. The participants were teachers, student teachers and their pupils (Pre-K through Grade 3). The various groups of teacher education students and practicing teachers studied, designed and implemented curricula based on critical literacy. The methods involve participant observation, interviews, teacher journals, and collection of learners' work samples. The data was then analyzed by categories that emerged, particularly as they relate to the theoretical perspective of critical theory.

The process of analysis was a long and dynamic one. Analysis and interpretation worked together to construct meaning and pointed to patterns themes and issues in the data and findings were seen in relation to one another and against larger theoretical perspectives, as well as evolving emergent views not found in the "the literature." As the observation logs, teacher journals, student work in the form of planning, implementation,

and evaluation of learning activities, and analytic memos provided bits and pieces of the information, the whole story of the research was kept in sight. This main story relates to the purpose (Wolcott, 1990) of the research.

In the research with teachers and school professionals in Brazil, a lot could be learned about human beings, the wide perspective of life and education, difficulties of being an adult (teacher or researcher) or a child, the suffering or joy they and us could have at school. One project, continuing six years, investigated the situation of childhood education and of the training of professionals, their educational histories, pedagogical programs implemented, work conditions, difficulties and conflicts, with three complementary strategies: (i) a questionnaire collected quantitative data and was answered by professionals in charge of public early childhood education; (ii) interviews were implemented with the purpose of understanding teachers' lives and professional experiences; (iii) documents and curriculum were analyzed to identify conceptions of childhood, culture and education.

According to Brazilian 1988 Constitution and 1996 Educational Law, early childhood education is a child right, a government obligation and a family option, implemented in day-care centers (for children from birth to 3 years); preschools (children aged 4 and 5) and in elementary schools with preschool classes). Since 2007, elementary school begins at 6 years old. It is worth saying that in 2000, when the research was developed, the State of Rio de Janeiro had 92 cities and 14.367.083 inhabitants, among them 1.500.000 children from birth to six years old, the majority (90%) in the metropolitan areas (the capital, Rio de Janeiro, and 16 cities around).

The research held the belief that children and adults are conceived as social actors who produce culture and are produced by culture, set in history and authors of their histories. This conception underlies the research developed on childhood, on teachers' language and literacy histories and on cultural education public policies, "cultural action towards freedom" (Freire, 1979). The observations and interviews were interpreted taking into account socioeconomic data and social and cultural conditions of the institutions. The undergraduate and graduate students, in their apprenticeship as researchers, participated in all phases and methodological strategies

In spite of the physical distance between the schools and the pre-schools observed and in spite of the cultural, linguistic and geographical differences between teachers interviewed, a lot of similarities could be identified, due to the affinities between the theoretical frame and the methodology developed in both contexts. Collecting the

data, identifying the categories that emerged from the field work, we organize the issues that disconcerted both researchers, based on what has been observed, listened to and read in the field notes and students/researchers reports, focusing on: how teachers build their professional identity; research and educational intervention; how researchers build their identity. Analyzing each of these categories, we have elected events identified in the research projects developed in the United States and in Brazil. This analysis is presented following section.

Research and Educational Intervention

Relationships among scientific research and public policies or educational practice are not immediate, simple or easy. Procedures, schedules, timings and priorities are quite different and even when there is an intention to transform, things can just not work. In the contexts of the projects analyzed here, we could observe events or situations when changes seem to be provoked or motivated by the presence and action of the researchers. The examples below clarify this.

In the past decade, the American researcher worked with a group of parents and teachers to design and implement a Bilingual Family Literacy Project in El Paso, Texas. Later, she initiated a similar project with another group of teachers and families to create a family literacy project in Minnesota with Hmong and Somali families. In summer of 2002, in Ankara, Turkey, she met refugee families on the run, seeking asylum, who taught me a lot about strengths of human spirit and determination for learning and positive family support in deplorable conditions. In London, in early 2004, she met families of Asylum Seekers from 68 countries who, with the collaborations of the Refugee Council, private foundations and committed teachers, had created one of the most dynamic and exciting elementary schools in the absolute poorest neighborhood in London.

She brought to various groups of teacher education students the learnings she had collected by participating with immigrant and refugee families, learnings about their strengths and challenges. Later, in New York City, students and she worked with families from Chinatown to Brooklyn to Queens to the Bronx—Latino, Syrian, Palestinian, Pakistani, Orthodox Russian Jewish, and Central American families. All encounters involved participants' use of critical literacy and personal historical and cultural knowledge. The teacher researchers worked to support students' multiple languages and recognize ways that multiple knowledge sources, identities, and language forms can contribute to the formation of new relationships and meanings.

In the various research projects developed in The United States students' family histories were considered as a part of education. What does history mean when studying teaching and learning? Critical literacy is a process of both reading history (the world) and creating history (what do you believe is important?) Large sweeps of history take meaning from the small stories.

One student (a teacher that was learning to be a researcher), who took part in one project developed in the United States, wrote about the complexities of being bilingual and bicultural and the interactions among different generations. Critical reading, critical questioning, and knowledge from multiple perspectives are intertwined in this student's story about three generations of family members.

L. and I are 22 years apart. We're the special girls on my mom's side of the family because we are the only granddaughters out of six grandchildren! L.'s mother (my aunt Eva) and I are only 17 years apart. When Aunt E. moved here to the U.S. with the rest of the family she was only 10, so of all her siblings, her English is the best. When L. was born, she tried to teach L. some Mandarin, but that idea was quickly abandoned because L.'s father only speaks English. L. seemed to have a preference for English anyway. When she does try to speak Mandarin, she is unable to distinguish tones; our grandpa joked that L. speaks [Chinese] like a pure American!

L. learned how to speak at an early age, and she is a witty child. This is a conversation I had with her once when she was almost four years old: (taken from my own personal journal)

L. (points to an advertisement written in Chinese): What does that say?

Me: I don't know.

L. (shocked look on her face): What?! Can't you read??

Me (hiding my amused look): Yes, I can read ENGLISH. But those are Chinese characters. I can't read Chinese.

L. (even more shocked look): But aren't you CHINESE?!

Me: Yes, I'm Chinese, just like you. We're from the same family. But no, I don't know how to read Chinese. How come you don't know how to read, if you're so smart? (I gave her a wink.)

L. (very serious): Because I'm not even four yet! I'm not supposed to know how to read right now!

Now, it was my turn to be shocked. What do you say to that?

I recall my mom and her sisters comparing our development, and they all agreed that L. is by far the wittiest and has the sharpest tongue, much like her mother. Each of us began talking early, but of all the cousins, only L. is not bilingual. There's still hope for her yet. I think she needs to overcome her self-consciousness first. Very recently my mom noted that I speak Mandarin and use Zhe Jaing phrases like my grandma (her mother) used to. She seemed pleased that I remembered these sayings even though my

grandma passed away ten years ago. I just always thought I was speaking Mandarin, not realizing I was really speaking my grandma's dialect!

In the research developed in Brazil, collective interview interactions constituted an important experience to researchers and participants. The goals were: to identify people's points of views, to recognize polemic aspects (in which there is no accordance), to provoke debate among participants, to stimulate people to be conscious of one's own situation and condition, and thinking critically about them. On the one hand, collective interviews may clarify obscure aspects by putting them in discussion, illuminating therefore the research subject. On the other hand, in collective interviews we could identify conflicts without hiding opposing ideas or positions. During the interviews, the researchers tried to make explicit words, expressions or concepts used with ambiguous or disputing meanings, in order to generate among participants and researchers signifying processes, redefining concepts. Thus, the group could think about the ideas and the stories that were shared, rethinking about their meanings, reviewing daily activities, problems and initiatives. After each interview, everybody could analyze the controversial questions detected and the ambiguity expressed.

Using case histories to reconstruct experience is a known methodological strategy already described in educational bibliography (Goodson, 1992). In this experience, the teachers interviewed listened to one another and in the narratives, their histories overlapped, their trajectories interwoven. A lot of educators work in two or more places. Some of them live in one city and work in another; knowledge, people and projects seemed related. Scenes, facts and people mentioned by one teacher also appeared in someone else's report, with the same or a different meaning, constituting an interesting and instigating collection, a mosaic as Benjamin (1987a) named it, where histories crossed. Even so, groups were heterogeneous: some teachers had worked with children in early childhood schools, kindergartens, pre-schools or elementary schools; others had worked in teacher education courses, colleges or universities. In the interviews, we could identify affective chains between the participants. By telling of their experiences and policy difficulties, explaining the pedagogical proposals developed and the subjective conflicts - concerning family and professional life - they exposed their individual and collective histories.

Listening to these histories, the researchers could learn about what happened with each one, but moreover could become acquainted with them as groups of women, children, youth or adult teachers, black and white people, of different religions, living in

different contexts, belonging to various generations (aged from 23 to 59 years). They also had diverse economic backgrounds and working conditions, according to the economic development of the cities they came from and to their family social class and background. Among this diversity and inequality, they had lifelong purposes in common: all of them faced the challenges of being the first educators – of those cities – who took the initiative and had the courage of dealing with very young children at a time where the working conditions were very precarious, where there was not infrastructure or official support, and where knowledge about childhood was not disseminated. Listening to their different histories, we could learn about their experience, we could feel their doubts, fears, passions or dislikes:

“I have always identified myself with little, with small children”;

“I love to deal with children!”;

“ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to be a teacher; I always had this desire, I always loved this profession”;

“infant education is where I want to be; infant education is my thing (minha praia)”;

“to be a teacher is my passion”; *“I turned to be a teacher by choice”;*

“I tried to run away from the educational area; but I couldn’t; I had a teacher in the University who said that teachers cannot run away; they always come back”;

“I didn’t start to work with education by chance”;

I began to study pedagogy because I didn’t have any other choice;...and today I can’t do anything else, I like it, it is in my blood...”;

“I knew that if I decided to remain in this profession, I would have to study more and more, to have theoretical knowledge; people believe that practice is all that matters, but by only practicing you can’t go far, you can’t say ‘what is right or wrong. So, I was scared and I began to look for help. I searched where to study”

“Adults can wait; children can’t”. (Kramer, 2005)

Emotion emerged from their report, as they expressed meanings and feelings, and talked about commitment, doubts, interest in studying, decisions they had to make through their lifelong histories. People talked about their practices and their needs for education. Being responsible for early childhood education, in charge of policy planning

and implementation, even in different contexts, they could share fears, problems and conquests.

In the research diary, one interviewer registered the feelings that seemed to characterize the relationships between participants and interviewers: *'this was the most significant experience of my life as a researcher. What I could listen to, was larger than what could fit in the record player'*. At the end of one of the interviews, during the evaluation, one of the participants said: *today, nobody left this room the same'*.

After the interviews, the group gained the participants' color, tone, voice and energy, the discussion ambience, the critical spirit and the controversial, the restless and questioning position of the researchers. Nobody left the interviews the same way they arrived. The intensity felt by all groups and the experiences shared surpass our expectations; we can then state that collective interviews resulted in mutual learning experience.

How Teachers Build their Professional Identity

Back to the United States context of teacher education, a group of graduate students studying in an intensive course which investigated cross cultural supports for immigrant and refugee families began one of their seminars by reflecting on their personal experiences with race and identity. One student who grew up in in the deep South (of the United States) wrote:

My racial identity has always the word black. However, what that means is hard to say. My family is more religious than cultural, so no one ever really talked about our ethnic history. To be honest, most people my age where I come from don't even know about Zora Neal Hurston and Billy Holiday. They only have heard mention of those more noted leaders of our culture, like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, but still couldn't share much knowledge about their beliefs and struggles. It became more important for me to learn more about my culture once I came to New York, a place of cultural diversity. Being from a place where there is only white and black leaves little need for explorations of any culture. ...Something Ms. Rosen (from Star School) said about the impact of "talking up" the community that she works in really rattled me and hit close to home. Most of the time, we (in my community) spend so much of our time sharing all the negative aspects our community in an effort to find help for it and to possibly change things. I think if we spend more time "talking up" the more positive aspects and possibilities, it will encourage those within that community to help themselves rather than sitting around waiting on someone else to rescue them. This doesn't indicate that I feel their struggles should be forgotten, but rather use them to support their efforts and accent where they are now versus where they came from.

A student from the same group, comes from different life circumstances, and perhaps, asks the most provocative questions at the end of her reflection.

I do not recall having any particular conceptions of it (racial identity) and the reason why I say this is because I did not feel disappointment like some immigrants who come here and feel as if it was not living up to their preconceived expectations. I did have a picture in mind, but it is hard to put into words. I think that it does not solidify itself until after real life experience....I am still trying to reconcile what the difference is between personal philosophy, personality and culture I find myself making statements about all, after seeing the actions of a few. ..Unable to see, think or believe what is outside of the racial check boxes. Why do we have to check the box? Why are the boxes there in the first place? Who does it benefit?...I feel that the process of migrating, in itself, changes the migrant,...The Jamaican culture is neither racial nor ethnic, but it is what I identify with most strongly. Yes, most of the population is black and so I guess many of us do not use the blackness as a unifying factor in the way we view potential friends. It is hard to understand the concept that those identifiers are now used to judge us when we do not necessarily to the same to ourselves. Yes, why are we unable to see outside the racial check boxes? Why are the boxes there in the first place? Who does it benefit?

Another student in a different group of master teachers learning to be researchers wrote about the complexity of her family:

When I think of my ethnic identity, honestly I think of so many things I don't know where to start. My family members come from all over the place actually, so I don't really know which ethnic group I identify myself with most. My mother is American by birth, as is her mother. But, my grandmother grew up in Mexico, as did my grandfather. My grandmother's family was from Mexico. My grandfather's father was from Greece, his mother from Mexico. My father, born in Mexico, is of European descent. His father was born in Stockholm, his mother in San Antonio, right next to the Alamo. My grandmother also has Swedish and German ancestry. And while he is not Latino, my father grew up in Venezuela. These are all of the things I think of when I think of my ethnic background. I tend to relate more to the Hispanic side of my family, because I grew up in San Antonio where there is such a large Hispanic population. I guess that would be the place my ethnic identity is tied to. Everyone in my family speaks Spanish; all my grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. While the history of Mexican people has not played a large role in my upbringing, I know some of it, mostly what I learned in school and from my surroundings. People in San Antonio are very aware of the Mexican culture and this is shown in various ways throughout the city. Even though I am American, I relate to the Mexican culture most out of all of my backgrounds because it plays such a vital role in my everyday life. There is not a large Swedish or Greek community in San Antonio. The earliest things I remember about my cultural background and ethnicity are the traditions of my family. I did not know much about Swedish people, but I knew what they ate at Christmas time. I knew some of their manners from stories told to me by my father's parents. I knew about the Greeks and what kinds of things they did at Easter. My mother's parents would take us to the Greek Festival held each year at St. Sophia's Greek Orthodox Church downtown. This is how I was introduced to my ethnic background.

When I think of race and ethnicity, I realize how complex of an issue it is. Because of my background, I look white to most people who meet me. Many people are surprised to learn that I am Hispanic. While many Hispanics that I know have encountered racism before, I have not because I do not appear to be Hispanic. I have a hard time saying that I am either white or Hispanic. Both ethnicities are part of me, so I cannot say which I identify with more.

I hope this all makes sense to you. It seems like it all fits in my head. When I have thought about it before, I never thought I was confused about this. It seems like I am a bit, though. I think part of it is what I have learned about race and ethnicity and culture over the past few years. They are not things that are so easily defined, I guess. (Quintero, 2004a, pp. 40-41).

In interviews developed in Brazil with professionals responsible for early childhood education issues of, identity, management, conceptions of childhood, conceptions of childhood education and of professional training emerged as core categories. We analyzed the coverage, the organization and the projects of elementary education and childhood education; the teacher education policies, the entry and the career of childhood education professionals at public schools; the material and financial resources of cultural institutions, based on data obtained through questionnaires submitted to the municipal education boards in the state of Rio de Janeiro. We took into account the historical and political context of childhood education in Brazil, analyzing the challenges faced by municipal policies after the implementation of the Educational Directives and Bases Law, in 1996, and the impact of Development of Elementary Education and the Teaching Profession Fund. (2)

Childhood education and teacher education have been studied by researchers and public policies administrators in Brazil, a country whose continental dimensions and a history of poverty and exploitation cause each problem to assume vast proportions. The State of Rio de Janeiro, where this research was conducted, faces major challenges: lack of continuity in sequential pedagogical programs, sparse cultural and teacher educational policies; low investments – the amount invested is generally directed to training courses or sporadic activities, like conferences. Brazilian society has undergone modernization, but concerning educational and cultural policies a lot must be done. (3)

The teachers interviewed told us their life stories, the difficulties they faced and their moving from one city to another to complete their graduate courses in Education or other professional careers. Listening to their stories, we could learn about: entry into and permanence in the profession; anxiety and ambiguities of the career; educating and caring; childhood education management; professional identity; training practices, problems and dilemmas; the relationship between theory and practice. Children up to 6 years old in the national social-demographic context and childhood institutionalization were also discussed. In the report, we emphasized teacher education as a requirement to ensure the right of children up to 6 years old to a quality education and pointed out the implications to policies on childhood education, on teacher education and school management professionals training.

Besides, as they talked about their plans and activities, exchanging ideas and suggestions, we could learn about the various strategies adopted in teacher education, the distance between theory and practice, frustrated options and fashions given up. The

discussion about professionalism and qualification revealed ethical contradictions and incoherent actions: teachers complained about political interference inside nursery and elementary schools; low income and poor living conditions even though they dedicated to their exhausting work; influential families tried to interfere in the school system by obtaining an available place for a baby or a job for a teacher.

On the other hand, group consciousness was strong concerning pre-school education: *“it isn’t only to teach or to instruct, but to work together”*. In spite of the lack of time among numerous tasks, they found a place and time to dream: *“things do not happen; we are the ones that make them happen*. According to one of the interviewed teachers, through her years of experience she had learned that *“we have to believe that change is possible; poor us, teachers, as says Paulo Freire, if we stop dreaming possible dreams”*.

How Researchers Build their Identity

In his or her trajectory, a researcher is always confronted or surprised by feelings of being comfortable or uncomfortable. Facing our own prejudices or aims, trying to deal with years of experience in teaching others can be disruptive in the process of the research. This means that sometimes the researcher doesn’t like what she or he sees. Sometimes we share and celebrate change that is going on. In our trajectories both cases weren’t rare.

In the projects developed in the United States, the data was analyzed using the framework of critical theory. The findings have been categorized according to the themes which emerged, mentioned previously. In addition, the framework also demands that the politics of knowledge and the origins of sustained inequities of modern society be examined by participants in the context of their studies (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), qualitative research is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counterdisciplinary field. They say that the word qualitative implies an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not rigorously measured or measured at all in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. The qualitative design supports the study of the intersection of languages (native and target), culture, instructional contexts, and the critical use of language by the learners. The design is the most appropriate for looking at teaching and learning that uses a critical theory framework.

In one group of students in the United States studying to be qualitative researchers, information was shared that had been summarized from “Ethical Conflicts in

Classroom Research: Examples from a Study of Peer Stigmatization in Kindergarten,” (Hatch, 1995). The discussion related issues of conflicts related to doing classroom qualitative research with young children to conflicts we were seeing arise in qualitative research in refugee communities with adults. Students were given an overview of qualitative research characteristics such as participant perspectives, emergent design, inductive analyses, research paradigms. They touched on post-positivist and critical/feminist paradigms and summaries of major philosophical and theoretical considerations (Quintero, 2007).

Students were asked to identify the theoretical and philosophical assumptions that currently guide their professional and academic study. It was explained that they would later connect these assumptions to their research interests and the qualitative methods to explore these interests. Some students were able to identify philosophers upon whose work they base theirs. Others were more general in terms of identifying what their intentions were.

Some examples of the logs in which students wrote their identified assumptions were:

An assumption from my field that heavily guides my work is that human motivations and behaviors are largely determined by their cognition. Something Ms. Rosen said about the impact of “talking up” the community that she works in really rattles me and hit close to home. Most of the time, we MSians spend so much of our time sharing all the negative aspects our community in an effort to find help for it and to possibly change things. I think if we spend more time “talking up” the more positive aspects and possibilities, it will encourage those within that community to help themselves rather than sitting around waiting on someone else to rescue them. This doesn’t indicate that I feel their struggles should be forgotten, but rather use them to support their efforts and accent where they are now versus where they came from. (Quintero, 2007, p. 117-118).

Another:

Children have a compassion and empathy for the “other,” and there is a danger of base propaganda and uninformed citizens . We need to expand foreign understanding of the human side of American, but moreover we need to bring understanding of other cultures here to the U.S. ...As global citizens we carry social responsibility. (Quintero, 2007, p. P.122)

And:

Learning the language and history is not all you need to know to understand a culture. You need interaction, conversation, a true understanding of the individuals themselves in order to really learn. How does this individual use the language? How the history of that area or group applies to that person’s individual life and personal choices. ...reading in texts cannot teach you about the individuals you have to try to integrate into a new culture. Only through sincere and empathetic cross-cultural conversations, can these adjustments take place. Customs are stronger than love. (Quintero, 2007, p. 117)

And:

I am influenced by Seyla Benhabib: Cultures are fluid and porous and thus there is definitely a way that we can understand one another...if only we try...societies needs to be able to access the layers our shared and unique histories with the ability to question the ideas and philosophies behind the creation, transmission and perpetuation of thought. (Quintero, 2007, p. 122)

Another student wrote:

Children are seen as individuals with personality, temperament, family culture, experience and historical contexts, driving desire for young children and families to develop deep relationships over time with those who provide their care and education. ... Geertz believes that learning about a community's local culture was the only way to truly understand. I take Geertz's idea of local culture as a guiding principle to understanding the many people throughout the world. (Quintero, 2007, p. 122)

The students were asked to give examples of experiences they have had over the research project time that they saw as an example of their using critical theory as a framework for rethinking some information about children and families. The critical reflections using personal history combined with qualitative methods of interviewing and observation and on-going analysis (in various forms) led to a daily increasing capacity for depth in thought.

One student wrote about a challenge to his thinking about parents:

Funds of Knowledge claims parent involvement creates a domino effect, and that we need to rethink the levels of parent involvement. This challenges my thinking. Perhaps in immigrant contexts, is involvement essential for success while parents may know very little about education, be poorly educated themselves, or not consider education a value? Yet, the families know their own culture and are the mediators between structured western educational stands and foreign culture. (Quintero, 2007, p. 123)

While the information gleaned from these experiences and participants has different tones and tenors, there are overlapping themes. The learnings from the diversity of students and their foci of investigations illustrate a mosaic of possibility for early childhood educators and qualitative researchers. Experiences such as these, with a theoretical frame that lends itself well (or demands) qualitative methods of study may be the nexus of hope for crucial understandings in an ever more complex world. Yes, if we can only listen to the stories, we can organize for change, and support the efforts of others. This is especially true in social and political contexts of communities and schools serving refugee, immigrant, and asylum-seeking families.

In the Brazilian research, two kinds of interviews were developed: individual and collective. This strategy favors us to observe the difference concerning diversity, hierarchy and power. In both types of interviews, the goal was to guarantee dialogues, considering

that there is a strong relation between life history, subjectivity and storytelling. We tried to conduct the interviews creating a space of narrative between the professionals and with the researchers. Nevertheless, the position between researcher and people interviewed are different. Dialogue, experience storytelling and confront occur with much more intensity during collective interviews as teachers could tell and listen to each other. Besides, as not only the researcher has the authority to asking questions or making statements, power and hierarchical position influences seem to diminish, conflicts and problems are presented with kindness and tension, knowledge is confronted, diversity is faced. Individual and collective interviews offer different discourse production conditions and a different place and point of view to everyone. In collective interviews, dialogical situation is enriched, speech becomes deeper and more substantial, and – overall - perplexity is expressed as long teachers which contexts have better conditions must deal with diversity and have to face other (and consequently his own) fail, failure and poverty. All educators interviewed were teachers, in spite of their temporary status as directors, supervisors or coordinators.

As Bakhtin (1988) pointed out, discourse is interindividual. All that is said or expressed is outside the speaker and does not belong to him only. Therefore, discourse cannot be attributed to the speaker alone. The author, speaker or writer, may have inalienable rights upon the discourse, but so does the listener, as do those whose voices resonate in the words found by the author. Discourse is a three-role drama.

Some Final Remarks

Building once identity as a researcher doesn't happen only in the course of a planned or intentional observation. The researcher's feelings and intuition remain alert in daily life. We learn how to listen to expressions only insinuated; we are capable of seeing what is not explicit or visible.

In Faith Ringold's *Tar Beach* (1996) and *Aunt Harriet's Railroad* (1995), the character, Cassie, uses her imagination and her stories which nourish her to overcome oppression and limitations. Children, through their play, especially when immersed in an environment of literature and art, can provide us with voices and perspectives of possibility. In the research developed in the United states, a student teacher who was just beginning to study the concept of critical literacy are exemplified by young children wrote in a reflective journal assignment:

I observed a child and his father riding the subway together. The train was very crowded and there was only enough room for the child to sit down, so the father stood in front of him. The put the child in the

seat and gave him some paper and pen to draw. The child looked around for a while and then finally began drawing. The father asked the child what he was drawing and he said he was drawing the father riding the subway. The father replied, "But I'm standing, not sitting down." The child then said, "Not on this train, the train in my drawing has seats for everyone to sit down." (Quintero, 2007, p. 123)

As researchers and professors, teaching for more than thirty years in universities, in different contexts in Brazil and in the United States, we also do believe in the possibility of building a society where there will be place for everyone. That is the main reason that moves our commitment with education and the way we develop educational research: to know deeply the world in order to transform it.

And, as we know, to comparing results and to drawing conclusions are always partial and provisional affairs in humanities.

Notes

(1) Funds were received from CNPq and FAPERJ. In 2007, Brazilian research group gathered 18 researchers: 3 university professors; 3 PHD students; 6 graduate students; 3 undergraduate students.

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