

# Historical education and autobiographical narratives

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## *Educação histórica e narrativas autobiográficas*

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to base the principles of history education, anchored in theories of history, analyzing the methodologies of research and praxis in the field of history teaching associated to the use of autobiographical narratives. The empirical basis is based on autobiographical and biographical surveys of teachers of history, of basic education, in order to interpret the uses of the principles of historical education and the results achieved in the classroom, in the trajectory of the students and teachers involved. Historical education presents itself as a fundamental strategy for the creation of educational contexts, formal and non-formal, school and non-school, necessary in the present reality.

*Keywords:* History Education. Autobiographical narratives. History teaching.

### RESUMO

A intenção deste artigo é fundamentar os princípios da educação histórica, ancorada em teorias da história, analisando as metodologias de pesquisa e *práxis* no campo do ensino de história associadas ao uso de narrativas autobiográficas. A base empírica fundamenta-se em levantamentos autobiográficos e biográficos de professores de história, da educação básica, de forma a interpretar os usos dos princípios da educação histórica e os resultados alcançados em sala de aula, na trajetória dos discentes e docentes envolvidos. A educação histórica, se apresenta como uma estratégia fundamental para a criação de contextos educacionais, formais e não formais, escolares e não escolares, necessários diante da realidade presente.

*Palavras-chave:* Educação histórica. Narrativas autobiográficas. Ensino de história.

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## Initial Considerations

The present text is based on a project developed between 2011 and 2014, entitled *The theory and practice relationship in the initial and continuing education of history teaching: the case of the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM) and schools of basic education in the central region of Rio Grande do Sul in the light of the concept of didactics of history and historical education* (from the original in Portuguese: *A relação teoria e prática na formação inicial e continuada da docência em história: o caso da UFSM e escolas da educação básica na região central do Rio Grande do Sul à luz da concepção de didática da história e educação histórica*), under the responsibility of the research groups JANUS – Research and Production Group in Historical Education, History and Education, and CLIO – Nucleus for Studies on Memory and Education. The project was coordinated by Marilú Favarin Marin, educator and researcher associated with the Federal University of Santa Maria – UFSM, Doctor in Education by the Graduate Studies Program in Education at the University of Paraná – UFPR; Jorge Luiz da Cunha, also from UFSM; and, Juliano de Melo da Rosa, from the Federal Institute Farroupilha – IFF of Rio Grande do Sul.

This article is based on the empirical basis of the project indicated above, associated with autobiographical and biographical surveys of history teachers in basic education. It seeks to interpret the uses of the principles of historical education and the results achieved in the classroom in the trajectory of the students and teachers involved. Evidently, many of the self-narratives don't indicate memories directly associated with the principles of *historical education*, in Brazil it is recognized as one of the main lines of the educational field of history related to teacher training and teaching practices. However, clarify concepts and methodological foundations linked to these *praxis* mainly associated with scientific production, among others, of Jörn Rüsen (1990, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2012, 2013, 2015), Estevão de Rezende Martins (2002, 2011a, 2017) and Maria Auxiliadora Schmidt (CAINELLI, SCHMIDT, 2011; SCHMIDT, 2017).

Historical education presents itself as a fundamental strategy for the creation of educational contexts, formal and non-formal, school and non-school, necessary in the face of the present reality:

In a country like Brazil, but also in many other countries, where education is measured in terms of utility and economic and ideological usability by right, center, and left-leaning governments, parties, and authoritarian and

populist social movements, new educational concepts must necessarily be designed and tested to influence the educational *praxis* of educators and learners. **Creation, training, teaching, formation, education**, among others, are concepts used by many researchers, educators, and students without distinctions. They are associated with family and school training practices. Here, it was naturalized the idea that creating the other from a preconceived moral model (of behavior, gender, religious or political belief, etc.), **training** the other to execute orders and perform tasks; **teaching** the other to reproduce what has already been created; **forming** the other from his/her structure to predictability; and **educating**, are the same thing. This reality probably underlies the instrumentalization and the failure, almost generalized, of the Brazilian education, which undermines democracy and can drag us all into mediocrity of the non-human. (CUNHA, 2018, p. 213-214)

The core concept of the humanist contribution of historical education associates itself politically with *historical consciousness* as a basic issue for the construction of subjects from autonomy and not on reproduction. There are no human subjects as a result of alienating reproduction and predictability, which are the legitimating foundation of the capitalist and conservative modernity. It is only freedom and autonomy constructed by the meaning of the always educational existential experience that guarantee human condition and political action, not as a duty but as a loving exercise in the relationship with oneself, with others, and with the world.

The methodology used to collect information among teaching staffs in the area of history is based on autobiographical and biographical self-narratives. Memories signified by the choice, the formation, and the exercise of teaching in the field of history teaching.

The intent of the use of autobiographical narratives is to transcend the methodological practice eminently technical and often Cartesian, related to the uses of traditional oral history, especially in Brazil. The autobiographical narratives registered in written or oral form is, by its nature, obviously subjective. This characteristic needs to be recognized dialectically and not as a complement to documentary research which characterizes traditional history. The autobiographical narratives give meaning to history in the present and lead the subject himself into the social context of his recognition.

A strategy that makes it possible to build a history around people rather than facts, selected objectively for manipulative political use. It drives the life recognized and narrated individually as part of collective history, extending the field of action of each one involved. It produces awareness that there are

no heroes and characters, but a human history, in which everyone involved, is fundamental. In addition, it doesn't dissociate, in school *praxis*, the relationship between teacher and student as part of a whole, bringing the history into the community and giving meaning to the history from the community (THOMPSON, 2000, p. 1-24).

Education as a social political possibility only produces satisfactory and meaningful results if associated with humans interacting with each other, assimilating mutually accepted standards of conduct. Therefore, teaching history from the transmission of content, information, and opinions is an alienating disservice that affects all the ones involved and, among other things, creates 'fractures' in collective coexistence. This is a fact that we experience in the present time in the world and in our country. Regaining the liberating political role of education as a whole and the teaching of history as strategy is necessary and significant to recover not only the expectation of the future, but also its realization.

## **Autobiographical narratives**

For the development of this article, we selected some autobiographical narratives related to the description and meaning of experiences lived by history teachers and the influence on their *praxis* in the classroom at public schools of basic education in the central region of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

We collected self-narratives of six teachers, three from elementary school and three from high school. After transcribing the memorials about the signified recollections of the school's formative period, professional choice, formation and teaching practice, narrative cuts associable with the objectives related to historical education and autobiographical narratives were selected. It is a choice methodologically associated with qualitative research, and also, a critical reflexive exercise in the face of the fragile and conservative structural functionalism that characterizes teacher training and the naturalized practices of history teaching until the end of the period of the last civil and military dictatorship in Brazil between 1964 and 1985.

Qualitative research methodologies constitute the set of guidelines that have guided the projects developed by the Nucleus for Studies on Memory and Education – CLIO, whose scopes have been guided by the ethical principles that constitute the epistemic-methodological spectrum of the research of both autobiographical and biographical nature (ABRAHÃO, CUNHA, BÔAS, 2018). Based on the research assumptions from life narratives, the project methodology

and strategy of action underlying this work maintain this perspective, assuming also some assumptions of the qualitative inquiry point of view, considering that it seeks to direct focus to aspects of the qualitative nature of elements considered fundamental for the evaluation of the school historical knowledge (EISNER, 1991; KNOWLES, COLE, 2008).

Our reference for research related to autobiographical and biographical narratives derives from the historical perspective of the overcoming of the quantitative research supported on large samples that consequently result in little standardized and canonical information concerning large social groups we know nothing about, but from which interpretative models that diverge from reality naturalize (BERTAUX, 2010). Researches founded on life narratives, self-narratives, autobiographies and biographies are not, by its qualitative nature, limited to the study of microsocial phenomena and processes (BERTAUX, 2018), as those associated with life histories:

The term 'life narrative' was introduced in France about twenty years ago. Until then, the term enshrined in social sciences was 'life history', a literal translation of this American term; but this term had the disadvantage of not distinguishing between the history lived by a person and the narrative that one could make of his/her life. However, this distinction is essential. In fact, contemporary debates are based on it. (BERTAUX, 2010, p. 15).

The practical and reflexive turn advanced in the last decades far beyond the limits of the research based on life histories, in which subjects, from their narratives, are only sources examined technically by omniscient and supposedly neutral researchers. The conduct of the investigative practices from life histories, through the praxis of life narratives, self-narratives, autobiographies and biographies progressed in the last three decades due to a redemocratization period that characterizes the recent history which, in turn, influenced the transformation of research concepts and its association with education through the recognition of the political educational role of reciprocity, empathy, sensitivity, and care (COLE, KNOWLES, 2001).

Many theoretical lines and schools were expanded and recovered strategically to support new research concepts and practices, as stated above. Important and acceptable examples, in the space restricted to this article, are the Critical Theory of Frankfurt School, characterized by the anti-positivist sociology, psychoanalysis, existentialist philosophy, and ethnosociology, based mainly on the production of knowledge of Walter Benjamin (1978, 1989, 1993), Jürgen

Habermas (1986, 2013) and Axel Honneth (2009, 2015, 2018). Another set of basic concepts and ideas of this constructivist turn, when looking at the interrelation of the biographical actor and his spaces and contexts of social actions, is the contribution of two Chilean neurobiologists, Humberto Maturana (1990, 1996, 1997, 2001) and Francisco Varela (MATURANA, VARELA, 1997; 2004). Their theory is anchored in the assertion that the classical notion that the living organism changes in response to determining factors operating in its environment is a mistake: - it is not an environmental disturbance that determines what happens to the organism, but rather the structure of the organism itself that determines the transformation that takes place within it as a result of the disturbance.

A detailed examination of the cited examples, critical theory and interactivist theory, and other ones (which unfortunately don't fit in this space) - as critical opposition to informationist and positivist education -, would certainly justify the growth of the research *praxis* and the meaning and resignification of autobiographical and biographical narratives uses as well as its relationship with history teaching through historical education, not limited to *autopoiesis* but amplified by *alterpoiesis* (MILLER, 2014), that characterizes the field of research and the *praxis* of historical education.

## Historical information

Human existence, which in the medieval period of European history was legitimized by the transit between the external determination of Christian doctrinal preaching to the character conquered by the 'knowledge of God' through the meaning of temporal existence - as exercise of good and of the recognition that the human is 'part of Him' (SANTO AGOSTINHO, 1984, 2017) -, underpins a concept of history as divine determination; and, consequently, imposes a model of teaching of sacral-doctrinal history.

In Western globalized modernity, the concept of history is consensual as science of the present constructed from human action in time and social space. In this context, the teaching of history lies in the dual perspective of individual action that always goes beyond the personal sphere and shapes the whole of society through different paths (MARTINS, 2017): - a traditional and restricted, which in historiography and other records, between the nineteenth century and half of the twentieth century underpinned historical interpretation, associated with the teaching of history, as descriptive and related to exemplary characters (heroes and villains); - a political and collective promoter, associated with

historical research and teaching of history as *praxis* of meaning; as a critical and creative practice in school and non-school spaces for the construction and achievement of historical consciousness of each one involved, in the critical reflection about the knowledge produced from human experience in the past and its effect on the attribution of meaning in and about the present. In this context, Estevão de Rezende Martins states that "... the controllable quality of the contents produced and used and the responsibility (pedagogical and ethical) of teachers and apprentices to themselves and to others must be preserved. The teaching of history is thereby simultaneously a profession and a mission." (MARTINS, 2011b, p. 43-44).

The most important theorist associated with historical education is Jörn Rüsen, responsible for the development of a new theory about historical science in the present time. Rüsen, in the beginning of his research trajectory on theory of history as science, is inspired by Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-1884), a university history professor in Kiel, Jena, and Berlin, who broadens and updates the concepts that legitimize history as a science linked to historic-political education (RÜSEN, 1990; 2013, p. 191-219; 2015, p. 189-215) by remembering the constitutive peculiarity of humanities through historical time and accomplishing the legitimacy of human existence through the educational exercise of cognitively meaning the social in the present. This underlies the characteristic of historical education by recognizing the mutability of interpretation through influences - collective and individual - social, economic, cultural, political, objective or subjective. All the essential elements of a theory of historical science are interconnected conclusively in the present, in search of satisfactory interpretations and politically acceptable meanings in the building process of human equality, without distinctions.

Considering that the theory of history, which serves as the basis for research and education in this field of human sciences, is not developed in a vacuum, but is recursively intertwined in current discourses and traditional and qualitative research paradigms, it is necessary to take into account that political events of the last quarter of the last century brought new influences to the scientific production of Rüsen, attributing to him new originalities. Most of these originalities are anchored in the dialogical transit with other areas of knowledge (RÜSEN, 2013 p. 253-281; 2015, p. 247-273).

Historical awareness is the central theme of Jörn Rüsen's scientific trajectory. In the face of the continuous anthropological basis that characterizes the human condition in search of the framing of existential conditions in line with objective and subjective aspects that give meaning to life, history as a science must have a concept of historical formation of meaning: - historical education as a context of conquest of historical awareness. Only in this way can a connection

be established between the present time and the past, as the historian-educator interprets distinct experiences over time and creates contexts of questioning, signification, and creation of meanings.

All this is significantly possible if the history is strategically understood as science without a doubt, as a science that differs from the natural and exact experimental sciences. Rüsén emphasizes the centrality in life, which alters the structural focus of a scientism that seeks to signify human life excluded from the universal knowledge, based on the reproduction of predictable identity models associated with axes of modernity as verifiable explicative and argumentative patterns of legitimization of inequality and of non-recognition. For Rüsén, the interpretation of the remembered, recorded reality associated with past/historical facts should be confined to interpreting the present reality, allowing the meaningful history emerge from simple facts (RÜSEN, 2013, 2015). Thus, the whole history arises from a meaningful narration!

In the historical perspective projected by this logic, the self (in the double dimension of the personal and social) finds its own place in the center. It is here that lies the temporal essence of life, in which past and future are intertwined through memory and expectation. This is where the internal temporality of the human subject is established. It could even be said: the human subject, in this historical dimension of his self, is himself time. He experiences himself temporarily. Such a self, constituted in the relation of identity with himself, includes reference to otherness of others. (RÜSEN, 2013, p. 275; 2015, p. 268).

The nature of the historical narrative is obviously distinct and the examples that have been selected here prove this affirmation. Historical education and autobiographical narratives are associated as historical science in the cultural life of an era. They have the strategic role of incorporating a form of humanism as building *praxis* of the unity from the awareness and recognition of human diversity to create the strategic bases for combating naturalized inhumanity in modern times.

## **Self-narratives and *praxis* of history education**

From the significance of experiences lived by history teachers of public schools in the trajectories of their lives, we related some examples that justify



the methodological synthesis between historical education and autobiographical narratives, starting from some examples from narrative cuts.

The three teachers of basic education, two women and one man, refer their choice for the teaching profession and their school practices from memories of their youth and education:

– One of them, who is already retired, but continues in activity, justifies the continuity of her work because she feels the need to continue ‘educating’, teaching history. When questioned about the characteristics of her practices in the classroom, she describes that she does not seek to reproduce information from textbooks, but use them combined with other textbooks, newspapers, magazines, and literature. She says that this diversity of resources creates a willingness among all students to produce original alternatives of interpreting the content developed in the history classes.

Asked about what inspired her to teach history this way, she reports that the inspiration came from a philosophy and religious education teacher from the time when she was finishing high school in a public school in the late seventies:

*My teacher in the religion and philosophy class always brought texts from many authors and we read and discussed them with everyone; ... in the following week, he would take us to a practical activity in the school kitchen, in the chemistry lab, in the art room, and even in the street. One thing I have never forgotten was when he took us to the biology lab, where in the presence of a doctor and before genital anatomical organs (male and female), he taught us how to take care of others is just as important as caring for them. The doctor spoke of adolescence and how boys should use condoms when having sex. The philosophy and religion teacher talked to us about care and respect. The entire class was present, boys and girls all together listened to that and then discussed it. I have never forgotten that!*

When questioned about what is the relationship between religious and philosophy education and the demonstration of how to ‘use condom’, the history teacher points out that this is how she decided to become an educator. She repeats that to teach history is to educate for the recognition that ‘*nobody is on their own*’ and therefore ‘*giving meaning to the facts of the past helps us to recognize our commitment to all*’.

– The teacher, who is in the beginning of his career and acts as a history teacher in public education for four years, states in his autobiographical account that he chose history as a result of his political activism since adolescence. However, what strikes the most in his account is the fact that the experience in the

social movements in which he participated often resembled religious sermons or catechesis classes and that this began to irritate him and made him question the effectiveness of those political practices. This meaningful experience made him choose the history degree ‘*to know the past and understand the present*’.

Narrating his teaching practices in the classroom, he states that he tries to exercise the student’s creativity in order to represent the relationship between the contents he develops and the reality of the present, especially the one involving their daily lives.

– The third collaborator, a history teacher in basic education, is in the middle of her career and describes her teaching practices from the interaction with other teachers from her school. She claims to develop teaching projects associated with thematic axes that group various disciplines. Projects that break the rigid structure of the curriculum and ‘*have a great positive effect*’ on the students involved.

When asked about how she came to these teaching experiences, the teacher recounts her participation in an extension project from her school that was related to ‘*citizenship*’ when she was in high school:

*In small groups, my classmates and I spent two weeks of September recording in public spaces the behavior of people in our city. Then, the collected information, numbers, images, and sounds were organized with the help of the math and sociology teacher. After the data was organized, with the help of other teachers, one of them of law, we sought to relate the behaviors, mostly negative ones, of the people observed with the legislation in force with respect to other residents of the city, etc. In the end, each group made an interpretation of the experience lived. The presentation was unforgettable and touching.*

The other research collaborators that inspired the writing of this article work in public high schools as history teachers. Two of them are men and the other one is a woman:

– Despite of being considered a very demanding history teacher, one of them reports that the high school students evaluate him very positively. When asked about this, he says that in addition to the textbooks available in the school, he brings books based on different historical theories to compare the texts usually used. Also, at least twice in each semester, he invites a history research professor to talk and discuss with his students.

When asked about what led him to characterize his classes from the extent of the readings and discussions, he recalls that a professor from the private

college where he earned his Bachelor's degree in History inspired him. This college professor worked with ancient and medieval history, but in all classes he always '*related the contents, texts, authors, presented and discussed with the facts of the present reality. I have to say that I got to know myself better in these history classes!*'

– The high school history teacher relates her choice for history teaching with the experience she had in her first graduation course, which was nutrition, in the state capital. She remembers that she decided to change her bachelor's degree to history motivated by the classes of *food history*. The professor of this discipline always taught classes in a large industrial kitchen, where the culinary exercises were based on historical information and interpretations '*very well narrated*'.

– The high school history teacher, who works in two public schools in the central region of Rio Grande do Sul, describes that his professional decision was based on accounts about his school life in childhood and adolescence. It is a negative but meaningful memory with a teacher who forced the students to do their 'home assignments', these homework's consisted of always answering between 20 to 30 questions from the content of the history classes. '*I hated this story from the fifth grade of elementary school!*'.

A positive memory has to do with the gym, where the teacher had another teacher, who, in his '*unforgettable*' classes, associated the history contents with art, literature, and sports:

*I remember that based on the questions of a classmate of mine about families in Brazil before the Independence, the teacher agreed with us to do a research about family in the history of Brazil..., motivating us to look for information in the library about indigenous families, enslaved Africans, European settlers... After the researches, presentations and discussions, we decided together to do a theatrical play about the Brazilian family to present to all classmates in the school gym on a Saturday at the end of the semester. This made me love history and choose to be a history teacher!*

These autobiographical narratives clearly show that history researchers and teachers become more self-conscious about the situations in which they are inserted when they base their critical understanding of teaching, in the field of history, on their meaningful life memories. This allows us to approach historical education as an emancipatory action research that places teachers at the center of the investigation as actors, as active cognitive subjects, not as products of structured and predictable formation, but as political agents (IBIAPINA, 2008, p. 11).

## Final considerations

The relationship between historical education and autobiographical narratives refers to the issue of human formation, and in this specific case addressed here, to teacher formation. Most of the theoretical interpretations about education center the perspective of formation in the academic, in the technical, or at times in the practical perspective, or even in social reconstruction. However, the analyses rarely take into consideration the connection between teacher training and the historical consciousness produced: - by the experience recalled as an apprentice in the field of history in childhood and in youth; - by the meaning produced through self-narrative, autobiographical and biographical, equally associated with historical consciousness; and, - by the experiential contexts and experiences of history teaching necessarily associated with adaptation to public policies, educational culture, desire and the need to create.

The autobiographical research associated with the teaching of history should be considered through the exploration of the intertwining among language, thought and social praxis paying attention to the specificity of the semiotic instruments that materialize the biographical fact in the process of biographization (PASSEGGI, 2010), and, thus, the historical fact in the process of historization.

The experience with autobiographical narratives (but also with biographical narratives) enables the integration, structuration, and the interpretation of spaces and temporalities of the historic-cultural contexts of the subjects involved, making it possible to examine, question, and dialogue, through this point of view, the process of construction of the self and others, of the subjects and groups of which participate in the dialectical interaction between social space and personal space through narratives. The teaching *praxis* of historical education necessarily question and consequently give meaning to the records of the human history, giving form to the experiences, existence, and commitment to the contexts involved, and attributing meanings to the subject in the course of their life, in the course of their formation, and in the course of history (PASSEGGI, 2011).

To innovate and participate in the world in all its contexts, which means to be prepared to elaborate the information that are produced in it and reflected in daily life, is necessary to understand that as citizens of the world we have the right to be sufficiently prepared to appropriate and make use of the instruments of the cultural reality historically constructed. This epistemopolitical positioning, resulting from the strategic political relationship between historical education and autobiographical narratives, creates the possibility of evolving

from the autobiographical self to a historic-cultural consciousness of the subject in relation to the world and to humanity without distinctions. History teachers are the political possibility, in the terrifying present, of constructing alternatives for the preservation of human equality, only admissible in the dialogical recognition of difference.

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