

**Culture circles, conscientization, and agency: The evolving narratives
of two Brazilian women**

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how two women in Northeastern Brazil narrate their experiences of dropping-out of school as children as a result of the socio-economic-political context in place and of returning to a participatory education adult literacy program, the culture circles (Freire, 1959). We employ narrative analysis (Ochs & Capps, 2001) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2003) to show how linguistic resources are used to convey agency and moral stance (Rymes, 1995) in these women's narratives and how their acquisition of agency and engaged practical embodiment is enacted through linguistic resources used in their stories. Their narratives changed from portraying themselves as helpless victims in which they oriented to an external and abstract sense of goodness due to someone else's action (dropping-out narratives) to perceiving themselves as active (hooks, 1991) agents, following collectively generated moral sources as they joined circles of culture and engaged in problem-posing, dialogue and problem-solving (Freire and Macedo, 1996).

Our study is based on narrative episodes (Appendix) from interviews with two women, Neide and Josi, and our analysis displays how the narrators portrayed themselves in dropping out of school as children and in returning to school as adults.

Dropping-Out Narratives

Both Neide's and Josi's stories of leaving school as children are similar in terms of the way they structure their narratives, the way they position themselves within a particular moral sphere, and in how they minimize the portrayal of their own agency within that sphere.

In constructing her dropping out narrative, Neide portrays herself as victim of other people's actions. She orients not to her own agency, but to generic standards of goodness. She uses narrative to locate herself as a good person, whose actions aligned with an assumed definition of moral goodness in her dropping out narrative. Josi constructs a morally oriented narrative situating education as an opportunity that was taken away from her. She wanted to go to school, but wasn't able to. In narratives, past and present may web together (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Josi concludes her narrative with the present in which she takes an ergative agent role (Duranti, 1997) in returning to school.

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Both narratives portray the narrator in terms of moral goodness; a situated, patriarchal morality. Both dropped out of school as children, but neither constructed a dropping out narrative in which they portrayed themselves as agents of that change. Their stories place the agency with some other character or concatenation of events and societal perceptions and orient to a prototypical morality that positions them as unable to remain in school.

First-Days Narratives

In telling the stories of their first days as they returned to school, both women narrate feelings of reluctance, shame, or fear that they would not fit in and orient to moral stances. Their narratives portray an uncertain moral stance. Josi portrays herself initially as unsure, afraid and ashamed. She indicates by the use of these words, her feelings of inappropriateness. Josi's story also brings attention to the timing of her educational experience. The expression "after so many years" conveys her presence at school during adulthood, reflecting a fluid moral stance. As she relates that she shouldn't be in school, Josi portrays society's expectations and the uncertain moral stance in her narrative. Even though she portrays herself as unsure and possibly inappropriate, Josi positions herself in the ergative agentive position (Duranti, 1997) indicated by the use of the pronoun *I* plus an *active verb*.

Neide reports feeling ashamed of how other people would see her. *I didn't know what other people were going to say*. Her narrative illustrates an ambivalent agency—and ambivalence as to which moral standards she orients. She portrays herself as agent at times, but a generic *they* also takes the agent role. She portrays herself as being afraid that she won't be seen as "good" or as orienting to a moral stance as she held dispreferred labels, such as single mother. Her feelings of inappropriateness are replaced by the portrayal of agency exerted by *they*—the positive support provided by the culture circle. Her repetition that she has no husband may be providing a warrant for her initial forays into individual agency. This suggests the generic imperative "of having a husband" still provides moral compass for her, even as she begins down a path that might not receive approval from "other people."

Returning-to-School Narratives

Such ambivalence about taking agentive roles dissolves in the returning-to-school narratives, and a collective and situated moral orientation seems to develop that is distinct from the societal moral imperatives evident most clearly in the dropping out narratives. In both narratives, the women portray themselves as having social agency which, in Neide's case, leads to social action.

Josi's return-to-school narratives are marked by the pronounced positioning of herself in the subject position in agentive clauses (c.f., Duranti, 1997), indicating agency being enacted by the narrator. Josi positions herself as protagonist, helping and solving problems together with others—orienting to goodness (Taylor, 1992) and a collective and situated moral stance. She portrays herself as an agent indicated by the use of the pronoun "I" plus active verb and as part of a collective agency by using the pronoun "we" plus active verb. She highlights an affective tie to the culture circles and this is one of the reasons she gives for returning day after day, except when she was sick (morally oriented explanation). Even when portraying the actions of others as helping her, she positions herself as an agent.

In Neide's narrative, she progresses from "I didn't know things" to social action. Rather than asserting her own individual agency exclusively, she portrays the collaborative nature of this program and how it instills a collective ethic and a call to action. When mentioning "here everybody helps everybody...everybody is learning together", the use of "everybody" helping others and learning together (as ergative agents) conveys her perception of the collaborative nature of this program. She makes use of intertextual narrative to illustrate how members of the group get help from others. This way, she constructs herself as oriented to goodness—but on terms quite different than the moral imperatives oriented to in the dropping-out stories. She critically questions what a good mother is. While she portrays herself as agent in attempting to change her children's situation at school, she does so by talking to the teacher and inviting her to be a good teacher. The responsibility for the success of her children is then defined by her narrative as a joint effort between the teacher, the children and herself.

Findings

This study contributes to the understanding of the development of one's role as ergative agent in returning-to-school narratives. After constructing a narrative that situates the narrator, who dropped out as the victim of other people's actions and having a certain moral stance, narrators construct an unstable narrative marked by shame and confusion. In these first-days narratives, the narrators place themselves as agents but do not orient to goodness or don't fully enact the role of ergative agent. This kind of narrative construction can be the intermediary step between the construction of a dropping-out of school narrative and returning-to-school narratives and may facilitate those who have constructed dropping out of school narratives to transition toward the desired and morally certain return to school narrative. Ultimately, their narratives convey the first sense of morality to which these women orient, which is based on generic (patriarchal) moral imperatives. After joining the culture circles, they construct a situated, collective moral compass within which they have a sense of agency.

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APPENDIX 1 – DROPPING-OUT NARRATIVES

Josi: Until the third grade, and then I wasn't given an opportunity to study anymore. My parents moved to a farm to work there...and there was no school there. My brothers could ride the horse to the city to go to school, but my father didn't let me. I asked to go. My father said that women wore skirts and didn't ride horses and he said that women who went away from home without their father and mother became badly spoken of. So I couldn't go. I wanted to go but I couldn't. Until now. Now I am here to continue.

Neide: I was one time in second grade. I liked going to school. My father and my mother let me go, but then when I was held back it was different. I didn't want to go back to school. That was not a good year for me. All my friends were in third grade. My mother said girls helped at home. It was better to learn how to take care of the house than to go to school. The last year I went to school my teacher gave me bad grades and...then my father said I should stop going to school. He said to help my mother. She needed help. Then I didn't go anymore.

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APPENDIX 2 – FIRST-DAYS NARRATIVES

Josi: I don't know... I felt like... so childish... with fear. You know, to go to school after so many years. I didn't know what I was going to see. I felt like I shouldn't be in school...because I thought that I should have learned to read and write when I was young. I felt ashamed and with fear.

Neide: A little ashamed. I didn't know what other people were going to say. A mother who doesn't know how to read nor write, with two sons, no husband, working at the dump, no husband. I didn't know what people would think. But they didn't judge me. They supported me and helped me solve my problems. They made me feel well. Now I know that even my sons want to come every day.

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APPENDIX 3 – RETURNING-TO-SCHOOL NARRATIVES

Josi: Now I like to come. I like to talk with my group. Even when I have problems at home...we solve them together. One day...Maria said... she was very sad because ...she was selling sandwiches that she made but she was losing money. We helped her to solve this. She learned how to sell the sandwiches ...and started earning money. That's what we learn. Real stuff. It is not like, this letter is A. We learn that the letter is A...but the teacher doesn't make us feel dumb. I want to come every night. I only missed class once when I was sick. I felt so sad. It's a group of friends, really. A group of people who don't judge me. I know they understand me and help me grow and learn.

Neide: When I didn't know things. But here everybody helps everybody. People help each other all the time. It is not like in school. Who is best? Everybody is learning together. Even the teacher learns with us. We decide the important things for us to work. It is good. People talk, help each other and learn. Just now, there was a woman who didn't know something, then another woman was helping her...with helping her son with his homework. I like helping with homework, but I am not their teacher. The teacher said I needed to be a good mother. I went there another day...and said that I was trying to be a good mother, going to school and all. Now she needed to try to be a good teacher. I told her how we learned in this program and how my boys do well. I told her that if she got them studying things that they do everyday they might do better at school. Now I know it doesn't depend on me or on them only. It depends on the teacher. They know a lot. The teacher needs to use what they know to teach them better. Now I want to see if she is going to try to be a good teacher like I am trying to be a good mother.

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