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Documentary Method and Participatory Research: Some Interfaces

Wivian Weller, Catarina Malheiros da Silva

As the pluralisation of spheres of life emerged, qualitative research became more relevant to study social relations. In an attempt to recognise the potential of the documentary method and of participatory research for the study of issues concerning the social and educational experiences of subjects, this article proposes to present conceptual and methodological frameworks of both approaches. Initially we explain the historical context of participatory research and also present the frameworks of reference of this approach. Then we discuss the documentary method developed in Germany since the 1980s based on Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. Furthermore the authors describe the ethnographic route of two experiments in research with young Brazilians in different socio-spatial contexts. These experiments were guided by the assumptions of the documentary method, but also by principles that establish points in common with the assumptions of participatory research.

Key words: qualitative research, participatory research, documentary method, black youths, rural youths, Brazilian youths

1. Introductory notes

The new social contexts and perspectives present specific local and temporal peculiarities, in which human expressions and activities clamor for recognition and transformation. These new configurations provide challenges as regards the theoretical-methodological procedures to be adopted in research,

since quantitative studies do not manage to understand these processes as far as their particularities are concerned. Currently, the qualitative approaches cover a multiplicity of methods, study of use and collection of a variety of empirical materials that present situations and meanings concerning the daily lives of individuals. The purpose of using a diversity of interpretive practices is to understand the subject studied more consistently (Bohnsack/Pfaff/Weller 2000; Weller/Pfaff 2000).

For educational research, the use of qualitative data enables apprehending the complex and multidimensional character of the phenomena in their natural manifestation, establishing a relationship with the broader cultural context. According to Denzin and Lincoln, “the competence of qualitative research is, therefore, the world of lived experience, since that is where individual belief and action and culture cross intersect” (Denzin/Lincoln 2006 :22). This is a way of understanding the contexts in which the subjects are embedded, especially the uniqueness of actions and interactions which motivate the researchers to attend the study places. This interpretive dimension of qualitative research enables the researcher to learn about the meanings that the subjects ascribe to the phenomena which mark their condition in the world.

In an attempt to recognise the potential of participatory research and the documentary method for the study of issues concerning the social and educational experiences of subjects, this article presents a synthesis of the conceptual and methodological frameworks of these approaches. Initially we explain the historical context of participatory research and present the frameworks of reference of this approach. We then present the documentary method developed in Germany, beginning in the 1980s, based on Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge. Additionally we discuss the documentary method as a proposal for the analysis of qualitative data. In the last part of the chapter, the authors describe the ethnographic route of two research experiences with young Brazilians in different socio-spatial contexts. These experiments were guided by the assumptions of comprehensive sociology and of the documentary method, but also by principles that establish a few interfaces with participatory research.

1.1 Participatory research: brief considerations

Comprehension of the history and current situation of participatory research requires understanding the crisis that occurred in social sciences, and acknowledging the social and political contexts connected to its emergence in Latin America, between 1960 and 1980. Participatory research appeared, both conceptually and methodologically, in the context of harsher authoritarian regimes in various Latin American societies. It was a time of transition, marked by an increasing rate of industrialisation, urbanisation and conflict, which triggered the rise of development models which were both politically and economically excluding. In parallel with this scenario, the development of alternatives of work with popular sectors, especially as regards production and communication of knowledge, continued (Gajardo 1986, 1999; Gabarrón/Landa 2006; Brandão 2006).

In Brazil, the context of the origin of participatory research is associated with the proposals for a liberating popular education developed on the basis of Paulo Freire's ideas at the beginning of the 1960s, the creation of new political parties and the emergence of social movements, from 1968 onwards. The pioneer experiments of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, especially his thematic research and the method for adult literacy, and those of the Colombian sociologist Fals Borda, based on their methodological strategies, were founding elements in the understanding of the development of participatory research in Latin America (Silva 1986; Gabarrón/Landa 2006).

Silva (1986) and Brandão (2006) point to the indissociability of popular education and participatory research, marked by a political and transforming character. Popular education, through its theoretical and epistemological framework, provides important contributions to strengthen participatory research in Latin America. For this approach, in a liberating education project no asymmetrical relations can be upheld between the researcher and the subjects of research. This contributes to the break with the idea that popular groups are mere objects of research.

Thus, as underscored by Silva (1986), Gajardo (1986) and Brandão (1999, 2006), this context enabled the emergence of a proposal for the investigation of social dynamics, anchored in a scientific position that recognizes the role of social forces in producing knowledge. Participatory research is a policy of

commitment to the popular groups and is conceived as an instrument to strengthen the power of the people. This new perspective presents an alternative to traditional social research and also affirms the researcher's commitment to social reality. The emergence of this approach is connected to various social practices, besides bringing together different theoretical frameworks and methodological proposals, with a diversity of foundations and also of destinations, making it difficult to institute a single concept of participatory research in Latin America.

In Brazil, social and solidary activities developed in the context of organizations of civil society and university extension have incorporated participatory methodologies. New opportunities to apply them, such as the dissemination of this tendency in fields such as social medicine and public health, local and sustainable development, co-operativism and participatory management, demarcate a scenario of action beyond the well-known studies developed in the fields of education, social work and rural extension. This type of research is also very strongly developed in the realm of social and educational research, above all the emancipatory and critical approaches and, more recently, through the contributions of post-modern approaches (Brandão 2006; Streck 2006).

Given its historical nearness to popular social movements, participatory research in Latin America presents peculiar characteristics, although it was influenced by European and North-American traditions. It contains the experiences accumulated in Latin America during the course of the last decades. As frames of reference, these experiences acknowledge the concrete reality of the groups with which they work; establishing horizontal and anti-authoritarian relations; the development of proposals for collective and group learning; the mobilisation of groups and organisations to change social reality. Another aspect that characterises participatory research concerns the commitment to political and ideological issues that surround social practices (Gajardo 1986, 1999; Brandão 1999, 2006; Gabarrón/Landa 2006).

1.2 Documentary method

The documentary method is anchored in Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, but also received contributions from social phenomenology,

symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and the Chicago School (see Bohnsack 2007; Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008). The documentary method is widely used in analysis of group discussions and narrative interviews (see Bohnsack 2004, 2010; Bohnsack/Weller 2000; Nohl 2006), but in the last ten years there has been an intense adaptation and use of the aforementioned method to analyse photographs, cartoons and films (see Bohnsack 2009, 2000a: 2010b; Liebel 2000; Baltruschat 2000a, 2010b). It is a theoretical-methodological instrument that enables understanding the worldviews and collective orientations of subjects in a given social context, whose experiences are linked to a certain structure, constituting a common base for the life experiences that mark the existence of these subjects. These worldviews are constructed based on practical actions and are part of the field that Mannheim defined as atheoretical. However, the worldview and orientation of the groups can only be understood once there is a conceptualisation and theoretical explanation of the practices of this atheoretical knowledge (see Weller et al. 2002; Bohnsack 2000; Bohnsack/Weller 2000).

The objective of this theoretical-methodological procedure for data analysis introduced by Mannheim's sociology of knowledge is to overcome the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity, since atheoretical, silent or tacit knowledge, as defined by Polanyi, rules action (see Bohnsack 2006, 2010). The documentary method allows access to the structure of action, which in turn enables reconstruction from the perspective of the actors. This structure is represented by people as a common knowledge available to all, which implies that it is not only the observer/researcher who has a privileged access, since the interviewees have a knowledge that they are not aware of (Weller et al. 2002).

Another characteristic of interpretation according to the documentary method refers to a change in the attitude of analysis, since it is no longer oriented to the *what* and begins to be oriented by the *how*. Thus, the researcher's task is not to explain the reality of the people who participate in the study, but to analyse *how* the reality in which they are embedded is constituted (see Bohnsack 2000). In this sense, the question of *how* brings us to the identification of the elementary *habitus* of practice. This functional

understanding or genetic interpretation is what defines the functionality of the action in this mode of interpretation. On the other hand, the immanent interpretation of social reality is the one that perceives intuitively and is returned to daily life. For Mannheim (1952) there are three types of meanings that can be identified in daily action, for instance, in the gesture of giving alms. There is an *immanent* or objective level of meaning that is given, i.e. that can be interpreted immediately; another refers to the *expressive* level of meaning, which is the one transmitted by words or actions and requires knowledge of the actors involved in order to be interpreted; finally, there is the *documentary* level, which documents practical action and requires that the interpretation process also involve the position of the one who is interpreting (see Weller et al. 2002).

Comprehension of the latter level occurs only by the development of a genetic attitude in the interpretation process (see Mannheim 1982; Bohnsack 2007). This attitude--made possible by the question concerning *how*--is fundamental to understand the documentary meaning of the worldviews or of the meanings of the actions of certain groups. Access to this documentary meaning occurs only via interpretation; for this it is necessary to have a route of access to the subjective content of the other, as well as an analysis of the researcher's insertion in the social context of the group researched in order to get to know the experiences and collective representations of the research subjects (see Weller 2000; Bohnsack/Weller 2000).

After these stages, a detailed reconstruction of the verbalised references and the way they are inter-related is necessary, since documentary interpretation does not start from preconceived methodologies or theories; the later are developed and incorporated reflectively during the research process. For this, procedural analysis must take into account the dramaturgy of discourses; these, in turn, are identified as focusing metaphors (see Bohnsack 2000). Focusing metaphors refer to the centers of interaction that are common to the members of the group researched. Mannheim called these centers 'conjunctive spaces of experiences', which concern the biographical and socialisation experiences that are similar and therefore have a common experiential space. These common interests may result from the experiences

associated with generation, social environment, gender, developmental phase and others (see Weller 2006).

On the basis of the three levels of meanings presented by Mannheim, the documentary method was updated and adapted to the analysis of empirical data by Ralf Bohnsack. Thus, “instead of the reconstruction of the *course* of an action (objective or immanent level), we will analyse and reconstruct the *meaning* of this action in the social context of which it is part (documentary level)” (Weller 2005: 268). Thus, the documentary method has become an important theoretical-methodological approach to analyse group discussions, narrative interviews, photographs, cartoons and films.¹

2. Experiences of ethnographic research studies with young people: interfaces between participatory research and documentary method

This part of the article will present the ethnographic course of two research experiences with young Brazilians in different social-spatial contexts. They were guided by the assumptions of comprehensive sociology and the documentary method, but also by principles that establish points in common with participatory research.

The first study was developed by Wivian Weller from 1998 to 2001 and consisted of a comparative study on youth cultures and experiences of discrimination among black youngsters in São Paulo and young people of Turkish origin in Berlin. During the field work, an attempt was made to understand the world views of these youths, the way in which globalised cultural styles are appropriated and re-signified. At the same time this study on the genesis, structure and role of peer groups analyzes the importance of

¹ For further information about the different steps of analysis according to the documentary method, see, among others, Bohnsack (2004, 2007, 2010), Bohnsack and Weller, (2010), Weller (2005/2006). Examples of analysis of group discussions based on the documentary method can also be found in the works of Gröesz (2008;), Valverde (2008) Silva (2009) and Carvalho (2010).

these cultural practices to construct identities, to deal with socio-spatial segregation and ethnic/racial or religious discrimination.²

The second study was performed by Catarina Malheiros da Silva as her Master's dissertation in the Graduate Program in Education at the University of Brasília, from 2007 to 2008, under the title *School, knowledge and daily life in the rural environment: a study on the youths in the Backlands of Bahia*³. The study was developed with young students of the Rural District of Espirado, in the municipality of Palmas de Monte Alto (BA), and sought to understand and analyse the meaning of school experiences in the education of youths living in the rural environment, besides learning about their daily experiences and future plans.

2.1 Itineraries of research with young blacks in São Paulo⁴

First I would like to point out a few biographical aspects and professional experiences that influenced the choice of the topic and of the subjects involved in the study, which became a doctoral dissertation submitted to the Freie Universität Berlin in February 2002. After finishing high school and taking a professional course to become an “assistant in community development”, I worked for two years at the Cantinho do Girassol Social Center, located in Ceilândia. The name of this area (CEI + landia) was the result of a very clear purpose: the Campaign to Eradicate Squats in the Federal District⁵. In Ceilândia I heard many stories of migrants coming mainly from the Brazil-

² For further information about the hip hop movement and that research project, see Weller (2003,2011).

³ This study was developed under the supervision of Wivian Weller and connected to the Research Group on Education and Public Policies: Gender, Race/Ethnicity and Youth (GERAJU). It was funded by Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado da Bahia (FAPESB).

⁴ Both research experiences will be reported in the first person singular, which is an invitation to the reader to follow the researchers in the reconstruction of the course taken by the research projects.

⁵ For further information see http://www.ceilandia.df.gov.br/005/00502001.asp?ttCD_CHAVE=4013, <access on 10/06/2011>.

ian Northeast to seek better living conditions in the new capital. Based on this experience, I received a proposal to study in Berlin (Germany), to where I moved in 1988 and did my undergraduate, Master's and doctoral studies. During this time I took several courses on Popular Education in Latin America and Intercultural Education in European and North-American countries. I also did traineeships in the field of education of youths and adults in El Salvador (Central America) and in the city of São Paulo. The result of my experience in São Paulo was a Masters' thesis on *Migration and illiteracy in Brazilian big cities* (Weller 1996). During the eight months' intership in 1992 in São Paulo and also as a result of my experience as a monitor of disciplines and project advisor at the Intercultural Education Institute (1993 to 1996), I began to take a more specific interest in the daily life of youths who face situations of racism and discrimination. During the doctoral research I could see that young blacks in São Paulo as well as young people of Turkish origin in Berlin experience similar situations of discrimination and marginalization. In the field work and respective analysis of the group discussions and narrative interviews, I found that the peer groups are a major space to share these experiences and to develop the collective *habitus* through which the young people begin to deal with daily situations of discrimination more confidently than in previous stages of their lives (see Weller 2003; 2011). In order to learn about and understand the daily lives of these youths it was necessary to establish a relationship of reciprocity and mutual trust; in other words, field research requires a degree of participation and commitment that goes beyond the conventional codes of research ethics and the instruments to collect and analyse data that are normally used. In this sense I will briefly reconstruct the course of the field research done with young people in the city of São Paulo.⁶

⁶ In this article I discuss the field experience in São Paulo. For further information about the field work in Berlin, see Weller, 2003; 2011.

*Field work in São Paulo*⁷

After my doctoral project was approved, I received a short-duration scholarship (3 months) to do research in São Paulo from March to May 1998.⁸ At the beginning I contacted a few organisations that I already knew, which I expected would give me access to the young people. However, the professionals who worked there argued that they needed to “consult the youths” and only then they could allow me to participate in the projects that were already being developed by these organisations with some youth groups. I began to feel some anxiety because of the short time to conduct the empirical research project and sought other ways of getting access to the field. A student at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo informed me about the existence of a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) which was doing projects with rap groups:

I decided to get to know the organization on a Friday afternoon and thus I established my first contact with young members of the hip hop movement in the metropolitan area of São Paulo, which was not a simple task for a Brazilian woman who had just arrived from Berlin and had received a three month fellowship to perform the field research. It was around 3 pm and I was not sure whether I would still find anyone there. To my surprise, I was received by two young people who participated in the project. The first one, Carlos, introduced himself as the president of Posse Estilo Negro located at Cohab Fernandes, in the eastern part of the city of São Paulo. The second one lived in another part of the city and was also the president of a posse. We talked for about two hours and in this way I was able to get detailed information about the São Paulo hip hop movement. Among other things, Carlos told me that Posse Estilo Negro would be holding a meeting the next day, in which a young visitor from Norway would participate. I immediately expressed my interest in being present at this meeting. The next day, at the agreed time, Carlos was waiting for us at a metropolitan

⁷ All the names cited from this point on are fictitious, including that of the neighborhood where the study was conducted.

⁸ Bursary granted by *Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst* (DAAD). The stays in São Paulo in 1999 and 2000 were funded by the *Evangelisches Studienwerk – Villigst e.V.* which also gave me a three-year scholarship for the doctoral studies.

train station, where we took a bus and went to Cohab Fernandes (the trip took about two hours in all). We went to Carlos' house where the meeting scheduled for 1pm was to be held. Some time later another member of the posse arrived with his wife and daughter. Other participants of Posse Estilo Negro did not come to the meeting. Carlos and his friend decided to take us for a walk around the streets of Cohab Fernandes so that we could learn a bit about the neighborhood (Field notes, March, 1998).

The research venue

Cohab Fernandes is a kind of dormitory-city, with buildings up to five floors high in the eastern part of São Paulo. The housing estate was built in the mid 1980s and had a population of approximately 200,000 in 1998. The infrastructure is poor, and it lacks accessible public transport, hospitals, schools, sports and leisure centres, parks, etc. Cohab Fernandes became an area with social conflicts due to the presence of organised crime groups. In those days it had one of the highest crime rates in the metropolitan area. The vast majority of the young residents in the neighborhood came as children with their parents from the Northeast of Brazil to São Paulo, or else they belong to the second generation of Northeastern migrants (Field notes, March, 1998).

The first walk through the neighbourhood can be described as a kind of test by Carlos and his other colleague. While they showed us the neighbourhood, they also made sure of showing us some particular aspects, such as holes in some buildings that resulted from shots exchanged between the police and groups connected to drug trafficking. However, as I had already lived in Ceilândia, I was not intimidated by what they told me, and at the end of the stroll I made it quite clear that I intended to return to the neighbourhood to do the research.

Through Carlos, the founder of *posse* Estilo Negro⁹ and my main collaborator in the study, I was informed that some of the young people in the neighborhood were participating in a course on STD/AIDS offered by the abovementioned NGO, and classes were taught on Tuesdays and Fridays in

⁹ *Posse* is a word used by the members of the hip hop movement for the association of various rap groups around cultural and social projects (cf. Weller 2011).

the evening. I started attending the course for a period of about four weeks and, in this way, I met many young people who were later interviewed. At the same time I began to participate in some activities organized by Posse Estilo Negro at Cohab Fernandes, such as distributing flyers about STD/AIDS prevention and condoms in some places in the neighborhood on weekends¹⁰ and in cultural activities, usually at the invitation of the young people themselves. During my trips to the neighborhood, I used to meet the young people from Posse Estilo Negro at Carlos' house or in the yard of a public school that had a "free access" policy to its outer buildings on weekends as way to provide at least a few opportunities of leisure for the young. The school was outstanding as one of the few that did not have walls and a surveillance system, among those that I got to know in the city of São Paulo.

Relations between researcher and researched

It is difficult to choose the experiences that built the reciprocity and trust of the young people who began to tell a stranger their life stories and their plans in the hip hop movement. It never was openly spelled out what led them to accept a white, female researcher in their company. I only recall a remark by Carlos, that if this were in other times, I would not be welcome, because the experiences of discrimination and segregation made them feel a generalised hatred of the oppressor group, i.e., any white person. During the study I was able to observe that few people from other social strata (regardless of being white or black) attended Cohab Fernandes. Many people, when they saw me there, asked whether I was a teacher at the school. This may have been one of the reasons that enabled me to get near the young people and obtain their trust: *I was prepared to take a bus and travel almost two hours until I reached Cohab Fernandes. I was not coming to work, but simply to chat and hear their stories.*

At the end of three months of almost daily trips to Cohab Fernandes or to other places where I was able to obtain more information about the hip hop

¹⁰ This was a project in which the young people received training and also symbolic payment to do the work in the community. Currently projects of this kind are usually defined under the heading of "youth protagonism".

movement in São Paulo, I did not yet have an idea of the wealth of material (group discussions, narrative interviews, interviews with specialists on the subject, photographs, newspaper stories) that I had managed to get together, since the details of the experiences of these young people were revealed mainly when I began to hear, transcribe and analyse their stories. My first phase in São Paulo ended with a farewell party organised by a teacher who is a friend of mine, Miriam Caetano, and who kindly let us use her house for this symbolic moment. I still have the video film made on this day, when the young people left some testimonies and sent messages to the Berlin rappers, since they knew that I was returning to Berlin to continue the comparative study.

After I returned to Germany I kept in touch with the young people through e-mails and letters. At the time, there were no digital cameras yet, and the young people had few photographs of their groups. I decided to organise a picture album and sent it to Posse Estilo Negro by regular post. The next year I returned to São Paulo for a second field phase in the months of April and May 1999. When I met them again I told them that I would be giving a talk about the study at a seminar at the Pontifical Catholic University (PUC-SP) and invited them to participate in the event. At the end of the presentation I had the feeling that they had approved of what I said, and that it had been essential to ensure them of anonymity, because this allowed them to attend the event without being identified. One of the youths approached and remarked: "You changed our names, but we knew who you were talking about ...". During the second phase of the field research in São Paulo the young people also gave me a magazine in which a story had been published about Posse Estilo Negro in November 1998. When I began to read the story that shows a number of images, I was surprised at a photograph in which some of the members of the posse are sitting in a half-circle around an object that was precisely the photo album that I had sent them by post. None of them said anything about it, but I had the impression that I was given the magazine as a way of thanking for something that appears to have meant much more than I had ever imagined: *They had in their hands something about the history of the posse which could be shown to journalists or to other people who might be interested in them.*

In the year 2000 I returned for a third and last field phase involving the doctoral research project. I did not come back to perform new interviews or group discussions, but to discuss data from my research with fellow doctoral students who were also doing research about young people in São Paulo and to participate again in a seminar organized by PUC-SP.¹¹ This time I came with my doctoral advisor, Professor Ralf Bohnsack, who offered to accompany me to Cohab Fernandes, in order to have a more concrete idea of the place where I was performing my research, as well as of the young people whom he had already met through the material that I had presented at the research seminars in Berlin. We were received at the home of the family of one of the members of the posse, and on this day there was an inversion of the roles of interviewer and interviewees: *We were no longer the ones asking questions about the groups and their experiences. On this day we were questioned by the youths who wanted to know the reasons that had led us to research them and what we intended to do with the research results.* These questions were not meant to exert control, but they were part of a dialogue in which they also took the position of being knowledgeable about the issue and therefore prepared to dialogue with us. At the end of the meeting we were given a book about black intellectuals with dedications signed by the young people on the first page.

2.2 Itineraries of study in the Bahia Backlands and involvement in a local community

Questions about rural youth have been taking up an important space in my life for some years now, since the young people of the Bahia backlands have always been present in my education and professional training. In order to recognize the specificities that characterise the local contexts of the rural milieu, I decided to perform an ethnographic study in which participatory observation and group discussions were the main instruments used to collect data. A total of ten group discussions were held with young people from the

¹¹ During my doctoral studies I kept in very close contact with a group of students advised by professor Márcia Regina da Costa of the Graduate Program in Social Sciences at PUC-SP.

District and from neighbouring farms, besides interviews with locals and professional educators; photographic records were made of the District in the months of February, March and July 2008. For this study I analysed two group discussions with young men and women enrolled in the last years of elementary school, based on the documentary method. The study draws attention to the relationship established between the young rural people and the school, as well as to the meaning of daily life, of the different ways of being young, conceiving them as subjects who construct a school and professional route combined with other dimensions, such as gender, religion, generation, race/color, income, locality, and others that make up each person's life (cf. Silva 2009).

The passages of the field diary presented below show my ethnographic experience in the District, especially access to the young students and the families, as well as the organisation of socio-cultural relations, the life styles and the meanings of formal education. For this article I emphasise the intense relationship I established with the population of the District and the farms during my time there.

First approaches to the young students and inhabitants of Espraiado District¹²

When I heard that the young people were travelling students, I decided to look at the route they take from home to school. This would make it possible to know the conditions of access to school transport, the relationships with their schoolmates and also the meaning of this "travel time" for each of them. It was March and classes had already begun. Before getting on, I took a photo of the bus and the students. During the trip the bus stops both at the entrance to each village and near to the houses. Just as during

¹² The rural District of Espraiado is located in the municipality of Palmas de Monte Alto, South-Southwest of Bahia, 840 km from Salvador. Its population is estimated at 20,779 inhabitants and most of the economically active population is concentrated in the rural area. Its main agricultural products are beans, cotton, manioc, sorghum, mamoná, maize and rice. The climate is hot and dry, with a mean annual temperature of 22° C; annual precipitation is 700/900 mm, and the rainy period is from November to January. The risk of drought is considered average, which favors subsistence agriculture, among other reasons for its large area of 2,787.6 km² (IBGE, 2010).

the break at school, the students sit together according to sex. The boys cluster in large or small groups and talk about the soccer game of the previous evening. They analyse it, they laugh together, they remain silent and start all over again. Meanwhile others keep their heads outside the bus window. Some girls sing stretches of the music from the movie “Tropa de Elite” [Elite Squad], at the same time as others students look at their notebooks, seeing the classes for the day. As the bus fills, some students sitting at the back begin to whistle. At the front some groups laugh loudly. I observe that at this time the boys are speaking more than the girls. They talk on the cell phone, they make remarks about the people who are passing on the road, etc. We arrive at 12h25 and Osnir parks the bus near the school (Field diary, trip on school transport, Fazenda Cedro/Distrito Espraiado itinerary, March, 2008).

The passage above brings to the fore the experiences of the youths on their route from home to school. This is the experience of moments that certainly strengthen the ties among the youths, since they have other possibilities of relationship between the peers, besides those established in the school space. The interactive dialogue about the daily experiences, full of pleasure, appears to confirm the value they ascribe to the existence of space/time for sharing. Understanding the daily life of young students involves the recognition of the existence of different spaces, such as the house, the neighbors and the town, where the young people daily have individual and collective experiences. In these spaces, they build up relationships with friends, experience leisure, establish relations with the mass media, participate in cultural and religious events, expressing a feeling of belonging, both to the community and to youth groups. In this sense, the daily experiences of the young depend on the intensity and richness of social life as it exists in the rural environment (Wanderley 2006).

It should also be pointed out that, for many research approaches, practices are accessed via observation, which allows the observer to become aware of the events in a given environment. Participatory observation is based on the location of the situations that occur here and now and in the environments of daily life, besides being a methodologically systematised daily skill (Flick 2004). Therefore, the researcher must be careful with their notes, since they present information about the subjects observed, besides personal reflections.

The record of ideas, strategies and emerging patterns is important for reflecting on the data of a qualitative study.

Although the intention had not been to perform a study on the community, since the purpose of the research project was to understand the meanings of school and daily experiences for young rural people, the interaction with the local inhabitants became close and continuous, as shown in the passage below. On the days following my arrival, the people of Espiraiado showed an interest in knowing what I was doing “there”, who I was and whether I was related to some local inhabitant. I understood that the community wanted to place me, initially based on themselves. After all, who circulates in that town is either a local inhabitant or is related to one.

After the worship service ended in front of the Catholic Church, I talked with a District teacher and a youth who had celebrated the service that evening. I talked about my research with young people and my interest in knowing about the history of the District. Bit by bit they told me whom I should seek out to learn about the District. Still in front of the church, they pointed with their hands to the houses of the locals. I asked the teacher to accompany me to the houses. She then volunteered to take me to the house of the local inhabitants. The next day, we went to the house of the first inhabitant. The details of each person’s life story were confided, at the same time as they interrupted the story to fetch some object of memory stored in other rooms of the house. That is how I saw the old photos of the people who lived there, which showed their “dear relatives”, who have lived “away” for some time. This reference is very recurrent in the comments of the local inhabitants, especially after they showed the photographs. They told me that I could take them home and bring them back whenever I could. This I did. Their story was merged with the story of the place (Field diary, on contact with the District inhabitants, July, 2008).

Becoming acquainted with the life styles, social history and schooling process was essential to understand the collective orientations of the young people of Espiraiado and the farms. The report of the observations made in the community is based on the relevance of recognising the spaces of people’s lives: visiting the houses, the market, the square, conversation about ordinary facts of daily life, as a founding aspect to understand the organisation of the context of sociability in the rural environment. Studies on communities may enable understanding the history of migratory movements and public schools

in the rural environment, since they are interlaced in the personal history of each one. Access to the history of these subjects enabled me to get to know another logic of existence, but also caused me to be afraid of making a mistake in interpreting, of romanticising their life.

Visit to the families on Mari Farm

We took to the road on a Saturday in the month of July. We left Espraiado at 8am. We began walking and slowly I recognized the place. As we passed in front of the houses, the children approached, accompanying us to the houses where people lived. When we arrived at Dona Cibele's and Senhor Ramiro's house, it was already midday. We talked about the families, the origins and the schools in the region. Dona Cibele confided to me the difficulties faced by a family that lives near her house. She asked me to visit this family to express my solidarity with them. During the course of the conversation, a young man addressed the couple asking for their blessing, since he was going to Espraiado. The grandparents gave him their blessing and told him to take care, since he was going to return on a motorbike. Then Dona Cibela announced lunch. The stories Senhor Ramiro was telling me were interrupted. The housewife offered me the bed to take a "snooze" after lunch. I accepted, because I felt tired and knew that the custom of offering "a bed" to the strangers who come there is part of local good manners. After a photograph session we went on (Field diary. Visit to the Mari Farm families, Saturday afternoon, July, 2008).

The various farms that are part of Espraiado District are the "homes" of many young students who participated in the study. In an attempt to learn about daily life in these places, as well as the meanings they ascribe to the "rural" area in which they live, I could not resist teacher Ana Paula's¹³ invitation to visit the Mari farm families¹⁴. This passage of the diary is representative to understand that the strengthening of ties of local life is ensured when all are

¹³ Ana Paula had taught a class with several grades at this farm and wanted to visit the families of the students whom she had not seen for some time

¹⁴ Mari farm is located 52 km from the township of the municipality of Palmas de Monte Alto. Many young people on this farm attend the Espraiado School and use the school transport.

prepared to help those who need support. In many rural villages, the residents faced natural disasters such as long droughts and floods. Therefore, it is part of the norms that rule the “place” to give help to those who need it, even if they are not family members. Another aspect to be emphasised is the presence of that young student at his grandparents’ home. This situation may reveal that interaction between members of different generations strengthens the values that are historically relevant for the group. The memories of the “local old people” about “the old times” on the farm as well as the principles of good interaction probably influence the socialisation process of these young people.

Returning to Espiraiado District: on presenting the research results at the school¹⁵

Tuesday, May 11 2000

The Tuesday was a very intense day for me. I ordered cakes and soft beverages from Dona Dalva already on the Monday evening. The school staff, without my asking them, kindly organised the tables, raised the Brazilian, Bahian and Municipal flags, besides setting up the sound equipment in the outside area of the school. They placed red satin cloths on the tables and put pitchers on the tables. From 7 pm on, the evening school students sat on the chairs, together with the afternoon students (who had also been invited to participate, by the principal) and people living in the District. Students from the Education of Youths and Adults programme also came. They had been invited the day before. Senhor Carlinhos, one of the residents I interviewed, goes to evening school at the same school and the same shift as his son. The same evening, I gave him his restored photograph (taken when he was 21 years old, when he arrived in São Paulo). Others who came were Senhor Eduardo (a resident who had also made a few “old” photographs available), Dona Branca (the first teacher at Mari Farm), senhor Eujácio, senhor Silvani and other residents. From the township came teachers Elizabete Trindade and Glória Lima (the first teachers in the district, in the beginning of the 1990s).

¹⁵ I was to return to Distrito Espiraiado in March 2010, when the community would hear the results of the Master’s degree research with young students and local residents done in 2008. But I was only able to travel to the District in May.

This initiative of the school staff, fixing the physical space to present the results of the study, called my attention and enabled reflections about the meanings of the research project for the group. The collective experience of the events, meetings, lectures is referred to as a positive one by the local and school community, since it is a practice which ensures the value of being together. The community's help in organising school events is a very common practice in the rural villages. Joining together around the organisation of these occasions involves all of the residents, which shows the collective dimension as an aspect that drives the events that take place in the community. Being together in fellowship at such times strengthens the feeling of belonging to the environment of which they are part.

After the acknowledgments, I begin presenting the work. Several times the students showed their pleasure on seeing the photographs presented (I emphasised both moments of daily life at school and moments of daily life in the community). I also perceived that the audience was very enthusiastic about the photos of the "old" residents interviewed (particularly those from Mari Farm). Many of these people rarely come to the district township, and although both the adults and young people know them, they stay on the farms. Possibly for this reason, but also for others, they reacted effusively when they saw the photos. Some residents, like Senhor Eujácio and Senhor Silvani, and teachers such as Glória and Jaime, besides Selma, the principal, and Rosário, the teacher, among others, talked after I ended my presentation (Field diary. Presentation of the study after 1 year and 10 months, Tuesday, May 11, 2000).

In the statements of the adults (education professionals, students of the Education of Youths and Adults programme, parents, grandparents) there was enthusiasm because they had been the subjects of the study and because the district had been its object. They referred to the young students present, stressing their role in preserving the district memory (these were observations calling on the young to take a positive attitude towards the place where they live, besides calling their attention to their educational development). Social acknowledgment because one has schooling, above all in the rural areas, where individuals have always been portrayed as ignorant, illiterates, appears as a relevant experience for the community families. The existence of public schools in rural areas in Bahia is recent, which helps enhance their value as a

symbol of local development. The short “school time” of many men and women in the countryside is inscribed in the collective memory of the community. Another relevant aspect is that the utterances were all made by the adults, and the young students did not talk. This situation encourages reflection about the intergenerational relations instituted in rural areas, like the predominance of utterances by the adults towards the young.

Final considerations

As new paradigms for studies appear, the need arises to give a voice to the subjects who participate in them, since the interpretation of social reality should not involve only a single perspective, above all the one to which the status of science confers greater authority. Participatory research and the documentary method contribute to the construction of the relationship between researcher and subjects during the research process, since they recognise the multiplicity of the subjects’ voices, in a propositive perspective.

The historical experiences of participatory research, especially in Latin American, teach important lessons regarding recognising the voices of men and women who participate in popular social movements. As regards the documentary method, this approach recognises the relevance of the relationship established with the research subjects, emphasising that contact with the subjects must be based on mutual trust for them to feel safe and comfortable. Another relevant aspect to be ensured by the researcher is the participants’ autonomy to organise or structure the utterances, choose the forms and topics of debate, encouraging them to run the discussion. The researcher’s task is not limited to presenting the reality of the people who participate in the research, but includes analysing the reality of which they are part.

In this sense, the researcher’s communication with the field is an aspect inherent to the production of knowledge. The subjectivity of the researcher and of the subjects involved is part of the research process, and it is important to consider the reflections made while recording the actions and observations in the field, as well as the feelings of insecurity, doubts and achievements as important elements for interpretation. Thus, constructing a flexible research work plan, marked by review, reevaluation and reformulation, requires

acknowledging the possibility of discovering new concepts, new relations and new forms of understanding reality.

Field work should be permeated by methodological rigour, at the same time as it recognises the relevance of the uniqueness of the environment researched. On going into the field, the researcher makes contact with experiences and situations, circulates in places and events, which ensures direct, prolonged contact. The researcher has the challenge of grasping and depicting these meanings. What meanings are ascribed by subjects to their lives, to daily events, to the world that surrounds them? What perception do the subjects have of themselves and of the existing social structures?

In this sense, the researcher's insertion into the field and access to people is a process that must be carefully planned so that they are able to understand the essential aspects of the research issues, and so that it will not be limited only to "enchantment" with the reality researched. The documentary method may be useful for this task, because it enables understanding the world views or the meanings of the subjects' actions. Access to this information occurs only through interpretation, and it is necessary to access the subjective content of the other and also analyse the researcher's insertion in the social context of the group researched in order to be able to learn about the experiences and collective representations of the research subjects. This method aims at analysing the different world views, which in turn are anchored in experiences connected to a given structure, and are a common base of the experiences that mark the existence of the subjects.

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