

Perceptions and senses attributed by students to their experiences of attending a brazilian public university

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions and meanings attributed by a group of ten students, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, about their decision to enroll in undergraduate studies at the Federal University of Sergipe (UFS)⁴, in Brazil. Sergipe is the smallest Brazilian state and is in the Northeast of Brazil. All students who participated in the research live in Cumbe, a small town located 96 km from São Cristóvão, where this higher educational institution is located. All of them are in different courses and in distinct stages in their studies. The methodological procedures of the research were based on Bernard Charlot's theoretical propositions about the relationship to knowledge. The research data were collected through the following instruments: questionnaire, "knowledge balance" and semi-structured interview. As a result of the research, it was found that upon entering the university, these students felt themselves in a place of non-position because in spite of having been admitted by the quota system, a legitimate evaluation process, in the majority of the cases, they are not attending the course they really wanted and must take evenings courses. Some have as their main goal to complete the course to get a job and some intend to continue an academic career in graduate schools.

Keywords

Relation to Knowledge. College education. University students.

Résumé

Cette étude avait pour objectif d'étudier comment un groupe de dix étudiants, appartenant à des classes sociales défavorisées, perçoivent leurs décisions de faire des études à l'Université Fédérale de Sergipe (UFS), au Brésil, et quels sens ils leur attribuent. Tous vivent dans la municipalité de Cumbe, située à 195 km de São Cristóvão, où se trouve l'institution en question. Ils sont dans des périodes d'études différentes et appartiennent à différents cours de cette institution. Comme processus méthodologiques de

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recherche, nous utilisons les propositions théoriques de Bernard Charlot sur le rapport au savoir; les données de recherche ont été recueillies au moyen des instruments suivants: questionnaire, bilan de savoir et entretien semi-structuré. L'enquête a révélé qu'à leur entrée à l'université, ces étudiants se perçoivent en un lieu de non-position, car, bien qu'ils aient été admis par le système de quotas, processus d'évaluation légitime, ils se sentent désavantagés parce que la plupart du temps ils ne fréquentent pas le diplôme qu'ils désiraient vraiment et suivent un cursus le soir. Ils ont pour objectif principal de terminer le cours pour travailler, certains ont l'intention de poursuivre leur carrière universitaire en master.

Mots-clés:

Rapport au savoir. Enseignement supérieur. Étudiants universitaires.

Introduction

“You have to graduate to get a job!”. “To succeed in life, you need to get a diploma!”. “Don't stand still, go study!”. At some point in life, young people heard such assertions, based on the argument that a better future depends on having a college education. In the contemporary world, one can observe an increasingly demand regarding the formation of young people for the job market. Graduating from college has become a necessary requirement for successful future in the job market and in life. In this sense, the global society turned out to be “running on knowledge”. According to Charlot (2013) every human being should have the right to access all levels of formal education. This author also emphasizes the universal right all individuals to be educated in the process of becoming a complete human being, have access to knowledge and all other possibilities as a subject of law.

Given the above, we elaborated the following guiding questions of the research: Why these ten pupils, the subjects of our research, have decided to enroll their undergraduate courses at that university? Would it only to guarantee a promising and successful future? Would they have other reasons to go to college, that is, to spend five years of intellectual effort just to have a profession, a job? And above all, what perceptions and meanings they attribute to their own experiences of taking so much time and effort to attend that institution?

It is worth mentioning that weekly, from Monday to Friday, they travel by bus, from Cumbe to São Cristóvão, about 192 kilometers, round trip, to attend their classes at UFS. All these students are from low socioeconomic class; their parents are mostly farmhands, self-employed or workers in the city administration, earning a minimum wage.

They entered the university through the National High School Exam (ENEM)⁵ the federal government's selection process, which is called Unified Selection System (SiSU)⁶. All of them were selected and approved through quotas for low-income students who attended public school in basic education.

In this context, our study tried to understand the reasons that motivated these students to take their courses at UFS. The criteria for selecting them as participants of this research were that they all were attending undergraduate courses at UFS; traveled every day to go to the university; lived in the same town, went to the same fundamental and high school, and shared similar experiences in applying to college. In other words, they were selected based on their similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

At UFS they share their experiences in the same objective social position since all of them are from the low socioeconomic class. Thus, our search data served to compare whether the reasons that directed these pupils to enroll that university were similar or different.

From this point, we stand out the subjective social position of these students, that is, their attitudes, the ways of thinking and acting in front of their concrete, objective social position, which surrounds them, and which are part of themselves as individuals. We also present Bernard Charlot's theoretical perspective, his notions of relationship to knowledge, in special, his concepts of meaning and mobilization.

Charlot's notion of Relationship to Knowledge

We are individuals of relationships. We entered the world and engaged ourselves in processes of socialization and subjectivation. We are social beings in the process of singularization and singular in the process of socialization and this double process directs us to become a human being. Both, the singular and the social dimensions, are intrinsic aspects of the human nature, they are inseparable and are responsible for the building of the human being, who in its incompleteness tends to become universal, not

⁵ The National High School Exam (ENEM) is a test conducted by the Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Studies and Research (INEP), a body linked to the Brazilian Ministry of Education, that was created in 1998. It is used to assess the quality of high school in the country. Its result serves to access higher education in Brazilian public universities, through the Unified Selection System (SiSU), as well as in some universities abroad.

⁶The Unified Selection System (SiSU) is a digital platform that has been operating in Brazil since January 2010. It has been used by the Brazilian Ministry of Education to place students who have taken the National High School Exam (ENEM) to apply for colleges and universities that participate in the system.

being more singular or more social, but human, an universal being (Charlot 2000; 2005; 2013).

Because we are beings of relationships, we are subjects to the need to learn. To born demands learning, being educated, humanized. Charlot points out that we are not born human, but in the condition of being human. And it is from this human condition, with the need to learn and being educated, that we enter a process with a triple pillar: subjectivation, socialization and humanization. Charlot (2000; 2005; 2013) defines this process as education.

According to Charlot (2005), the relationship to knowledge is “the relation of the subject with himself, with others and with the world” (p. 19), that is, it encompasses all aspects of the individual acting and being in the world, his singularization and socialization that made him a complete human person.

To learn it is necessary to be engaged in an activity. And this activity not necessarily need to be intellectual, for there are also relation to learning that is much broader than knowledge (Charlot 2000; 2005). Thus, there is not learning possibility if before there is no relation to knowledge. That is, there can be no knowledge outside a cognitive activity, without it no one can have and develop knowledge.

For knowledge is the result of a cognitive / intellectual interaction that is a relation. As Charlot emphasizes: “[...] knowledge is a relationship. This relationship [...] is a form of relationship with knowledge. So, if the question of the relationship to knowledge is so important, it is because knowledge is relationship” (Charlot 2000: 62).

If knowledge is determined by relationships, it involves senses and meanings of learning. And in this perspective, what are their perceptions and senses attributed by those students to their experiences of going to college? Do they coadunate to the symbolic logic of the institution itself?

Probably not, because based on Charlot’s (2000; 2009) findings, in his researches in several Parisian high schools, that took years of investigation, the teaching sense of the school not always match the senses of learning of the students. The author argues that both professors and students give different meanings to the word learn. In other words, the symbolic logics of professors and students are different concerning the term “learning”.

What we want to make explicit is that there are many ways to learn and to acquire knowledge, both at school and out of it. And these knowledges are inscribed in the subjects' knowledge relations with the world and with the others, without these relations

the subject of knowledge cannot exist. Thus, “there is no knowledge that is not inscribed in relations of knowledge [...] there is no subject of knowledge and there is no knowledge except in a certain relationship with the world [...] this relation to the world is also relationship with oneself and with the others”. (Charlot 2000: 63). Therefore, there can be no knowledge without having a relationship of the subject to the knowledge. And this relationship is permeated with meaning and intellectual mobilization.

So, what makes these undergraduate students travel 192 Km to attend several hours of classes at UFS? Mobilization may be a possible answer to this question. They might have good reasons to make such effort to go to class every evening.

Another aspect to be explained is the subjective social position of these students that belongs to disadvantaged social class. That’s because we organize our actions and thoughts accordingly to our social position. Charlot (2013) mentions that “when we are young, we build ways of thinking, intellectual schemes, and psychic dispositions, according to our social environment” (p. 164), those structures are linked to the *habitus* of an objective social position. Thus, each of us have a unique social story, and a particular way of acting, thinking and seeing the world. This psychic process leads to an idiosyncratic way of occupying and interpreting one's social position. We believe that those factors have a relationship to the decision of those students to attend UFS. As a matter of fact, these elements are essential to understand our questions, since when those students entered that university, they occupied a subjective social position from their own objective position.

However, in despite all their difficulties, they decided to go forward with their studies. And so, they mobilized themselves, because they did not want to remain stagnant in high school or elementary school, which would correspond to their social class expectations. They wanted to go further, to overcome the symbolic barriers determined by social hierarchies. This means that these students are social agents, who have their own life stories, their desires, interpret their own experiences and have a broad view of the world. And they act in their own lives and have the power to change them (Charlot 2013). Actually, they have also the power to transform, another person’s life, acting as social agents, transforming thoughts, that serve as tools for social mobilization.

As Charlot (2013) points out, the student “has a social basic position, defined in terms of income and life conditions, but he also has several other social positions” (p. 166).

And it is from the points of view of this author, that we sought possible discussions for such questions.

Detailing the research

Initially, we invited ten students from Cumbe city who are studying in different courses at UFS. These students went to the same elemental and high school in their hometown. The data collection was based on these three instruments: questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and “balance of knowledge”. They contributed to draw the general profile of this group, and to understand the fundamental issues regarding their relationship to the university.

The research was developed over a period of three months, which was enough to collect important data, which enabled us to get several elements of answers to our questions. The subjects of this research agreed to participate in all stages of the investigation voluntarily. They signed a document certifying that they were aware of the objectives of our study and authorizing the publication of the results, without identifying their names.⁷

Who are the students and where are they from?

As we have already emphasized, our subjects are from low socioeconomic background, whose parents are farmerhands, drivers, housewives, teachers, retirees or self-employed. They are students aged between 18 and 26 years. Four of them are males and six are females and they all study in night classes in teaching courses; six of which are between the first and third period; three are between the fourth and sixth period and one takes classes from the fourth and sixth period.

Their families' income of 70% of the subjects is one minimum wage⁸ and 30% earn less than it; 60% of the female parents did not complete elementary school and only 10% completed high school. And 20% of the male parents have never attended school, that is, they are illiterate. 70% of them went to school but have not completed elementary school, only ten per cent have completed this educational level.

⁷ Their statements were identified, in this paper, by the letter S (student) and the number of order of their participation in the research.

⁸ During the time this paper was written the minimum wage in Brazil was 998 reais.

The students' areas of concentration are Education and Human Sciences; Exact Sciences and Technology Biological and Health Sciences. Five of them are majoring in Letter (three in Portuguese/Spanish and two only in Portuguese), one in History, one in Pedagogy, two in Biology and the other in Chemistry, totaling five different areas of knowledge.

According to 70% of the students, their families encouraged them to go to college, while 30% reported that their family members did not encourage or were indifferent about their studies.

Among the respondents of this research, seven entered college in their first attempt of the selection process. While one tried twice, and two of them had to take the exams three or more times. Most of them are single and financially dependent on their parents. In relation to the time they started their studies, there are students that enrolled UFS from 2011 to 2019.⁹

Results and discussions

The data collected in the research indicated that 60% of students chose their courses based on the subjects they liked when they were in basic education. Others mentioned that they always had the dream of being a teacher. However, one respondent pointed out that he chose his course due to lack of option (S/4).

When asked if they could choose another course, which one would they prefer, nine students report that, as matter of fact, they intended to follow another career.

I had and still want to study Journalism. But for now, I just want to finish the Spanish course (S/2).

Yes, I wanted to study Medicine. But it is too hard to get it (S/4).

Yes, Civil Engineering (S/7).

Yes, I did! I really would like to take Physiotherapy (S/8).

This type of complaint is very common among students from popular class that are in Brazilian public universities. That happens because the concurrence for courses such as medicine, physiotherapy, civil engineering and journalism are very high. Besides these are full time courses, which become very difficult for poor students to attend because

⁹ There are students who canceled their registration during some academic semesters, others failed some subjects or attended the minimum credit per semester. That is why some of those students started their courses in 2011 and still did not graduated. Usually, an ungraduated course in Brazil takes between 4 to 5 years.

they need to help their parents. Usually, those students take a teaching course in the evenings and work during the day to help with the family income (Zago 2006; Zago, Romanelli et Nogueira 2013).

Although they did not enter the areas of study they want, those college students plan to complete their courses in which they have enrolled. When the respondents were asked about their expectations for the future careers, they responded positively.

I see myself as a good teacher and an efficient researcher (S/4).

I see myself studying more and more (S/5).

I am taking Spanish for the first time as a foreign language. And I feel that I am constantly learning it. Therefore, in the future I want to be a good Spanish teacher (S/6).

I want always to learn more and have opportunities to experience unbelievable things and go ahead for a doctoral degree. And so, take part of all the opportunities offered by the Federal University of Sergipe (S/8).

I see myself fulfilled (S/9).

In reference to college students, Charlot (2007) emphasizes the following points: not always there is a correspondence between the student's place of origin and the university. This can lead to the student's success or to his frustration depending on how he connects himself in these two different worlds. That is, between the symbolic logic of the university and the logic of the student's community, which is built accordingly to its culture. "It is a challenge to find out if today in Brazil, it is possible to be a college student without having to give up its own popular place, and yet without knowing the specificities of its places, the practices, the knowledges" (p. 54).

We also asked if they had difficulties to enter college and if they felt comfortable in the current courses. To this question we got positive and negative statements as well. This shows that they are not always affiliated with their courses or have been able to enter their symbolic logic.

I don't feel very comfortable because I'm shy and it gets in my way (S/1).

Not! But I thought I would find it difficult when I came in, because my family can't afford to support me. So, I have to work (S/4).

Yes, I feel comfortable here. I wanted to get more involved in the activities, but I live in the countryside. Therefore, it is really difficult for me to participate in the scientific events offered by UFS (S/5).

Yes, I feel many difficulties taking my classes. As soon as I started the first academic semester at UFS, problems and difficult situations appeared in my life that prevented me to advance my studies (S/6).

Considering the negative statements, we wonder how these students, from such small town, whose families did not go to college, and, therefore have not cultural capital to

mobilize them went to college, as mentions Coulon (2008). And how they build their practices and knowledges that indicate academic affiliation. This researcher refers to college affiliation as a period in which the student understands and interpret the devices of the institution that rule the students' academic lives daily and acquires knowledge as springs that propel their ability and competence on the academic and intellectual level.

We also refer to Bourdieu (1998) who indicates that the acquisition of the cultural capital, which is social and symbolic, is a fundamental element to the production of favorable or unfavorable effects in distinct groups of society. It is built throughout the lives of individuals, whether through family socialization, in the communities, as well as in several different kind of institutions that transmit culture such as schools.

In these spaces is produced relationships to knowledge between the man and his environment, he settles to a greater or lesser extent his cultural framework. Based on the idea that learning is a relevant feature of the human condition and that we need to understand the different types of knowledges, their functioning and how they are assimilated (Charlot 2000; 2007).

When we asked our subjects what led them to desired enroll UFS and the reason why they want to finish their courses, they reported that through their studies they expected to achieve a better future, having a college degree was a dream, a way to get a better job.

My desire to have a higher education (S/2).

I decided to go to college because I wanted to have a better future, learn new things and be a student of a public university. My parents could not afford the university tuition (S/3).

I wanted to attend a public university because it is free of charge. A person like me never could afford the tuitions of a private university. My projects and dreams never could be reached if I did not had entered at UFS (S/8).

I want to finish my course as soon as possible and start working in my area. What motivates me to finish college is my passion for my course and because of my professional and personal future (S/1).

To work as soon as possible, to be selected for a public job position. And later, after my graduation, keep studying, to research in my field of study (S/5).

I decided to go to college because I want to have a public job (S/10).

It is also was reported the importance of the diploma for their upcoming professional development.

I want to be an excellent professional, to be for my future students the kind of teacher I always wanted to have (S/4).

It is nice to know that in a couple of years I will be receiving a teaching diploma in the Spanish language. This language is very important for the Brazilian students, I will do my best to show my future students how valuable it is to our American Latin identity (S/1).

My diploma will allow me to do a very important work. Through my profession I will be able to build critical and reflective citizens, conscious of their rights and duties (S/5).

The responses show that the main reason that motivates the students to get a college degree is the desire to have a profession, to be prepared to get in the job market and have a career in a public job, which is something that is highly competitive in Brazil.

In the symbolic logic of many students it is necessary to go to college in order to have a good job, and, therefore, have a financial situation better than their parents. This kind of thinking is also very recurrent among young people from other countries. In his researches, with French university students, Charlot (2009) got similar results.

On the other hand, there are those students who also enjoy studying and learning, who find at the university an opportunity to share knowledge and develop the desire to research.

I wanted to go to college because of the possibilities of doing, researching (S/1).

I want to enjoy my course as much as I can. What motivates me to finish the course is my willingness to work and to share my knowledges with others (S/9).

My course is very interesting, I just love it, especially my laboratory experiment classes (S/9).

There are so much interesting things at UFS! I'm in the 5th period and I'm learning a lot! My favorite subjects are Linguistics and Linguistics Applied to Spanish Teaching as a Foreign Language (S/2). I love studying languages (S/2).

I decided to have a teaching degree because I want to teach reading skills for as many children as possible (S/7).

The university for these students is the only opportunity “to make progress”, “to have a better life”, “to have hope” (S/4); It is also a “second house” (S/3); a place of discoveries, “UFS means a lot to me, it is an escape valve, a place where I really discovered who I really am” (S/1); “Going to the university meant taking a step towards my financial independence and intellectual growth” (S/10); UFS is a place that foster tolerance and “respect for all” (S/8); it is a place of dreams “it was here where I started to make my dream come true” (S/9); a place where one learn to think “my course makes me think about the kind of teacher I should become” (S/5); place of recognition and pride “I am proud of my university, of my origin and I hope that soon my family will be

proud of me” (S/2); and of pleasure, of having fun, “UFS is such an amazing place!” (S/8); and of great expectations “studying at UFS is being fantastic!” (S/10).

The respondents also expressed their awareness of preparing their future students to become critical and reflective citizens.

When I start working, I will try different ways of making my students to become critical and reflective citizens. I believe that it is the main role of a teacher (S/4). As a teacher of the Spanish language, I will have the chance of making my students perceive and reflect about the political, economic and social problems of our country. Teachers are agents of change (S/1). Through my profession, I will help young people to think, to be critical, to be aware about their rights and duties. That’s the only way to change the country (S/5).

In the third instrument of the data collection of the research, “the balance of knowledge”, we made a statement and asked the subjects to complete it with a sentence or a text. The statement was it: “some years ago I was in high school, now that I am attending UFS I am ...”

With the same enthusiasm I had before entering this university. But I must confess that I enrolled a teaching course because my ENEM’s grade did not allowed me to get in the course I really wanted. However, today I am pleased doing the Letter Course because I am learning a lot. So, I want to get my teaching diploma and get a job to help my mother (S/4). I intend to finish my Letter Course and go to graduated school (S/3). I understood that I can go beyond what I imagined, so I soon realized that it is possible "a for young black woman, from a poor and humble family to have an academic formation (S/8)". My thinking has changed. When I started college, I began to see beyond my culture and to respect even more the differences (S/10). I always wanted to be a teacher! I always dreamed to study at this university! And I got it all! So right now, I feel fulfilled cause I know I have a future... (S/9).

We have perceived in the subjects’ testimonials that there is a mishmash of feelings linking their academic studies, their background lives and the way they see their future. For them, academic accomplishment means a great personal achievement. This clarified for us their mobilization to study at UFS, which is the only public university in the state of Sergipe. The testimonies of the S/8, S/4, S/10, S/9 and S/3 highlight their concern to their social positions and life goals.

The statement of S/8 showed her concern in being a black and poor woman in Brazil; S/3 is just in his first year of college, but he already is planning to go to graduate school; while S/10 shows that through his studies, he has changed his ways of thinking; and for S/10, going to UFS gave him self-confidence, self-esteem. Therefore, we can say that

they are occupying two positions: The one that is linked to their objective position, the need to get a diploma to work and help their families; and that related to the subjective social position, go ahead with their studies, going to graduate school, become researchers (Charlot 2013).

Conclusion

We are always situated in a social and economic position. And from that place, we build our thoughts, attitudes and behaviors. We think and act in the world according to our culture, and social class. This means that we have a social concrete position, our lives are structured according to it. However, from Charlot's perspective (2013) "there are several subjective ways in which we can occupy an objective social position" (p. 165).

Thus, these students, as singular subjects, can place themselves in an attitude of thinking and reflecting different from their own objective position. Their actions/attitudes are related to their singularity. There is, to the psychic capacity all human beings have to think, reflect, and act in the world. Therefore, belonging to a particular social group does not necessarily make the individual thinking and acting in accordance its standard of living. Despite being social, reproduce actions and cultural values of the society to which he is inserted, the individual is also singular, having the capacity to interpret its own life experiences as well as the others. According to Charlot (2013) what will define our subjective social position is the way in which we interpret our objective social situation.

Consequently, the sense attributed by the subjects of this research to their experiences in attending UFS is associated to their wishes to improve their lives through education. They do not want to repeat the same life story of their parents, who have low intellectual and economic levels and, as a result, do not earn well and do not have social recognition. They interpret their parents' life stories as negative references to their own lives and do not want to reproduce them. And the only way they believe will make it possible is through the acquisition of knowledge. So, for this group of college student, education is the only tool of social and professional rising. Due to this, they expect to break the cycle of their families' financial and educational situation, going contrary to the theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu et Passeron 1992; 2014). Bourdieu's theory presents explanations to class disparities in educational achievement and of broader issues of class reproduction in capitalist societies. He argues that exist a parent-to-

offspring transmission of cultural practices, behavior and values, which are transferred to children through the process of family socialization, that he defines as habitus.

According to Bourdieu's social reproduction theory, students from lower class families could not enter the university because their objective positions would prevent them. However, according to Charlot's assumptions the subject not only reproduces its social situation, but also acts on it. As we have already emphasized, the subject is both singular and social, therefore has the capacity of breaking the structural logic of the system of social reproduction (Charlot 2000; 2005; 2013).

The student's subjective position in relation to a given situation is correlated to the way he sees and interprets the world and his own experiences, as well as he perceives himself and the others. In another words, it is related to the relationships that he maintains to knowledge. This process gives the subject sense to life and it is related to the way he thinks and acts in face of different situations. Through it, he finds his own reasons to mobilizing and to achieve his goals and desires (Charlot 2000; 2005; 2013).

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