

# The Social Relationship of Research in a Study about the Agency of Children in School-Family Interface

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The content of this paper is part of a broader research that took place in Portugal. It is related to children's experience in school-family interface throughout the 5th grade, when an ecological transition occurs due to an educational stage transition. Our purpose is to examine the social relationship of research established between the researcher and the children, their parents and teachers, from the moment the students move into the new school. With the children's agency within the framework of school-family relationships as background, and having implemented a qualitative methodology, using the main tools of the ethnographic method, the data were collected with the children in weekly participatory activities and through conversational interviews. Data were also collected from teachers and parents, through interviews and through observation of weekly lessons with the class tutor and of parents' meetings. The data collected were subjected to content analysis. This research reveals children as competent social actors who act intentionally and strategically in the school-family relationship structure. This strategic action is further reflected in the way children appropriate the data collection activities promoted with them. Moreover, it is also present in the strategic uses they make of the social relationship established with them.

*Keywords:* School-family relationships; Children's agency; Ethnographic method; Social relationship of research

## Introduction

Research on family-school relationships has mostly been concerned with the adults involved, namely parents or teachers. Most of the time, in spite of the fact that children are the reason for these relationships, their active role is not acknowledged (Almeida, 2005; Sarmiento & Marques, 2007).

In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the emergent childhood sociology gave children a new sociological and methodological status, recognizing them as social actors (Almeida, 2009; Rocha & Ferreira, 2000; Sarmiento & Pinto, 1997). The study of family-school relationships from the children's perspective gained a new insight and new research trends were opened. Perrenoud (2002) introduced the key concept "métier d'élève". Sarmiento and Freire (2012) emphasize that "Assigning importance to the voice of the child (of all students) is a recent novelty in the field of education." (p. 106) and they also ascribe great relevance to the

interrelations within educational institutions, namely school and family. The way children experience the interaction processes between their families, the school and their educational practices concerning school is a challenging avenue. This is a line of research in which, as Sirota (1998) proposes, the traditional interrogation about what the school, the family and/or the state fabricate is reversed, giving rise to another question about what the children make up in the intersection of these instances of socialization. Montandon's conceptual framework (Montandon, 1997; Montandon & Osiek, 1997), which presents three dimensions of the children's experience (representations, emotions and strategies), is a useful tool to perform such research, having productively been used in several studies (Montandon, 2005, 2007; Montandon & Longchamp, 2007).

Transition years in school systems are ecological transitions (Bronfenbrenner, 1987), in which family-school interactions may be of crucial relevance to the successful overcoming of those stressful changes in setting and role. In Portugal, a study by Abrantes (2009) has shown that transition years are critical stages, underlined by increased academic failure. The Portuguese

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school system makes the transition to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade a particularly critical one, with the children going to a new and much bigger school, having many teachers instead of just one, and having their status of "big kids" replaced by the new one of "small kids". Due to the criticality of this transition, the 5<sup>th</sup> grade is particularly interesting for research focused on the children's agency in the school-family relationships.

Our study on children's agency takes into account the concepts of duality of structure (Giddens, 2000) and of interpretive reproduction (Corsaro, 2002, 2011). As Corsaro (2002, 2011) states, children select information from the adult world and use, refine and expand aspects of the adult culture, in an intentional and creative way, creating their peer cultures, while they also play an active part in the reproduction and changing of the social structures of the adult world in which they participate. The secondary adjustments (Corsaro, 2011) are particular forms of children's agency, consisting of the use of strategies to evade adult rules and thus gain a certain control over their lives, for instance, at school.

The way children think, feel and act are better grasped through research carried out *with* them rather than *on* them (Corsaro, 2011). Ethnography has been pointed out as a research methodology suitable to give children voice and enable them to become research participants, with an active part of research subjects, no longer considered as mere research objects (Corsaro, 2011; Ferreira, 2004; James, 2001). Furthermore it "helps correct the oversimplifications of more distal approaches" in educational research (Beach, 2011, p. 572). Milstein (2010) states how crucial the role of the co-researcher carried out by the children was for her ethnographic research, considering that their viewpoints provided distance from what she calls "the 'official conscience' pervading adult opinion" (p. 1).

When undertaking ethnographic research, the researcher must not neglect the fact that simply by being present on the field, s/he becomes part of the social network under study and interferes in its reality (Caria, 1994; Costa, 1986, Silva, 2009b). The presence of the researcher in the field introduces a series of new social relations that are continuously rearranged during the fieldwork. Costa (1986) points out the differences that may exist between the way in which the researcher initially introduces himself/herself and how people will redefine his/her identity according to their respective representation system. Therefore, in a reflexive ethnography, a reflection on the social relationship of the research is crucial and the ethnographer must analyse any influences s/he might have on the interactions taking place (Caria, 1994; Silva,

2009b), which is a prerequisite to ensure the objectivity of the study (Costa, 1986).

As Caria (2003) stresses, the ethnographer must be inside the context under study so that s/he can understand it, but, at the same time, s/he also must be outside of it to be able to rationalize the experience and build a legitimate scientific object. Therefore, ethnography is a border place. Ethnography aims to articulate the systems of meaning and social action of the groups being observed, and the systems of meaning and scientific-social action, in order to explain the everyday issues and translate them into scientific language.

Nevertheless, an insider perspective in ethnography with children poses considerable challenges. The difference in age and social power constrains the researcher's acceptance by the children and the building of a trusting relationship (Christensen, 1999). Aware of these difficulties, Christensen (1999) and Corsaro (2011) tried to lessen the gap between them and the children by not performing any adult roles, in order to be recognized as "atypical adults". The same idea is conveyed by Fine and Sandstrom (1988), who, defining the researcher's possible roles according to the extent of positive contact with the children and the extent of authority over them, identify the role of "friend" as being fostered by a relationship based on trust and positive affect and low authority, without the performance of any explicit authority role.

According to Vasconcelos (1996), the researcher must establish a dialogic relationship with the participants. She bases this assertion on the work of Paulo Freire, who considers that dialogue is not possible in a relationship of domination, and on the work of Britzman, who posits that in a dialogic relationship theory and practice inform each other.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship that occurs within the context of an ethnographic investigation on the child's experience in school-family interface throughout a transition school year. Thus, the social relationship established between the researcher and the children of a 5<sup>th</sup> grade class and their parents is considered from the moment the students moved into the new school.

### **Methodological options**

Our broader study, in which this paper is inscribed, is intended to enlighten about the experience of children in school-family relationships throughout a transition school year, namely the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Our intention was to examine how children feel, what they think and how they act within the intersection of school and family at this stage of their lives. The decision to undertake a case study of ethnographic nature during a whole year was sustained by the fact

that participant observation carried out for an extended period, in which the ethnographer is participating in people's daily lives, allows the researcher to collect data not available through differed techniques, such as interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1986).

Special care was taken in the selection of the school and the class tutor, to guarantee viability and access (Yin, 1993) and a case rich in information (Merriam, 2002). Viability and access were ensured through the selection of a school where one of the authors was well known, as she had frequently developed collaboration activities there, such as in-service training of teachers and information sessions for parents. Moreover, in the course of that collaboration, the researcher established very good professional and personal relationships with many teachers. The headmaster authorized the study, and to enable the accomplishment of the fieldwork, he allowed that author to move freely within the school, under previously established conditions, which were continuously analysed and updated throughout the school year according to research needs and dynamics of the school. To ensure a case rich in information, the role of the class tutor could not have been neglected in this study concerning the child's experience in school-family interface, since the main functions of the role are coordinating all matters related to the class and providing a link between the school and the family of each student in a more personalized way (Zenhas, 2008). Therefore, a purposeful sample was the option to guarantee a case from which the most could be learned (Merriam, 2002). A 58-year-old female teacher was invited to cooperate in the research, since she was recognized by the school community as developing strategies aimed intentionally at socializing the 5th grade children as students of this school level, as well as socializing the parents in their new role as parents of those students. She accepted the invitation.

The study took place in the selected Portuguese school, with 1200 students from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, between 10 and 15 years old. The unit of study was the 5<sup>th</sup> grade class ascribed to Marta, the selected class tutor. This class, which had 27 ten-year-old students (17 girls and 10 boys), mostly from middle class families, was distinguished from the others because it was the only 5th grade class with a curriculum aimed at learning music.

Since reflexive ethnography requires the assumption of the presence of the researcher in the field and of his/her interferences in reality, the use of first person singular "I" is a manner of making that presence explicit (Silva, 2003, 2009b). Therefore, from now on, the first person will be used to refer to the author Armanda Zenhas, who carried out the fieldwork.

Viability and access were also safeguarded through the informed consent of the children and their parents, in a meeting with the class tutor and me in the beginning of the year, in which I informed them about the study. After having asked a few questions, they gave their informed consent, which was renewed for each data collection procedure throughout the year.

Ethical issues were particularly considered, due to my professional status, considering that I am a middle school teacher, even without having any professional link with those children. There was an imbalance of power, since I was not only an adult trying to do research with children, but also a teacher trying to do research with students. Such overlapping roles can facilitate the occurrence of ambiguities (Vasconcelos, 1996) and have an impact on the relationship with the children and their parents. Consequently, two conditions were clearly guaranteed to participants: (a) respect of confidentiality of information, by not using it for purposes other than research, and (b) protection of the anonymity of participants and the school.

Data collection was based primarily on *participant observation and field-notes*. Therefore, I was present in the school several times a week throughout the year, continuously observing the interactions between children, children and adults (students - teachers, teachers - students), or interactions between adults (teachers - parents) in the events and places in which those interactions occurred. These very frequent opportunities for interaction with children (and parents) provided me with the chance to have many *informal conversations with the participants*, and *participatory activities* with children. *Informal conversations*, also known as "conversations with a purpose" (Burgess, 2001), "conversational interviews" (Burgess, 1980), or "ethnographic interviews" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1986), are mentioned by several authors (Burgess, 1980, 2001; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1986; Silva, 2003) as social events suitable to establish and maintain a relationship with the participants and rich opportunities to collect data, with the potential to provide greater depth of understanding than just formal interviews. These conversational interviews occurred in the way described by Silva (2003, p. 99) as: "an always unfinished conversation, always ready to be resumed at any time or space"<sup>1</sup>.

*Participatory activities with children* emerged unexpectedly over the course of the research. In the beginning of the school year, an unanticipated opportunity for collecting data emerged a few times when I had lunch with some

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<sup>1</sup>Free translation from the original Portuguese text.

of the children in the canteen. The school had recently been built and there was still work in progress. The playground was still being built and the 1200 students had only an indoor pavilion and a small outdoor space to spend the breaks. After lunch, children were supposed to go to those spaces, but I soon realized that they tried to escape them, which was not easy. They did not feel comfortable or safe there, because those places were overcrowded with children and they were afraid of the older students. Furthermore, they had to wait about 50 minutes until the first afternoon class. It occurred to me that I could provide children with a space to spend that time in a pleasant way, performing *participatory research activities*, designed and carried out with their collaboration, since they are productive techniques of research with children, and empower them to take an active role in the research and in the construction of knowledge about themselves (O'Kane, 2000). I expected the six children who had lunch at school to attend the participatory activity sessions, which I anticipated to last until the opening of the playground, in January. Surprisingly, 16 kids attended the sessions on a regular basis, and requested that the sessions last for the whole school year, until the very last week.

The data collected were subjected to content analysis, enlightened by the theoretical framework used and already presented. This framework enabled the definition of *a priori* categories, which were introduced in the computer program NVivo 10. The material was then inspected and scrutinized, with several new categories emerging during this process.

### **The intricacies of the social relationship of research**

When I approached the school for the first time in September, I saw a beautiful but enormous building (the old building had been demolished during the summer vacation). When I entered, I was in such a huge place, with so many corridors, that I had difficulty moving from one place to another. The smell of fresh paint from the walls was in the air. The cleaners were cleaning the floors and washing the windows. There were still many workers completing different tasks. I saw several teachers walking around the school, guiding themselves with maps. Marta, the class tutor, was one of them.

My entry in the field occurred simultaneously with the entry of the children in that school. I could observe the curiosity of everyone, for the first time entering the school they had seen growing for more than one year. The considered beauty of the building and the classrooms was consensual, according to the comments I heard and the facial expressions I watched. Nevertheless, some people also commented on the large size of the

school. From the beginning, I had a special concern and care about the issue of my acceptance by the children and their parents. I was aware of the importance of establishing a relationship of positive affect and trust, as well as not being assigned a status of authority (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). However, my dual status of adult and teacher, who investigated participants with the dual status of children and students, put me in a situation in which the increased imbalance of power could hinder the development of trust. I could not fail to take into account that the unrepeatable set of events I would observe during the study would be conditioned by many factors, one of them being my presence in the field and my ability to be accepted and considered reliable by children and parents.

Marta introduced me to the children and their parents during their first meeting, on the very first day they went to school. For the first time, I - a middle class woman in my fifties, known in that school as a teacher, trying to be recognized and accepted as a researcher - met the 27 mostly middle class students and their parents, with whom I intended to carry out my study. I had decided to adopt an "explicit cover" (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988), by particularly carefully presenting my research purposes and methodology, as well as by clarifying some ethical issues, namely the safeguard of confidentiality and anonymity. In addition, I also tried to use a very understandable language and to give an explanation comprehensive enough to incorporate the very different paths that the research could take. The faces of children and parents were showing interest and willingness to collaborate. That was the beginning of a relationship marked by respect, trust and affection.

What were the children and their parents' representations regarding this relationship and how did they evolve throughout the school year? How did those representations affect the course of the research?

### **Children's views**

During the previous year, the children had had mixed feelings fed by ambivalent representations about the new school they would be attending. They felt happiness and pride because they were growing up and they were going to a brand new school. They felt sadness because they were leaving many of their friends, but also joy because they were going to meet new friends. They felt fear because they were going to have many teachers, new subjects and many tests, but also happiness because they were going to learn new things.

It was not long before the happiness of growing up had been replaced by the fear of the "big kids". Children were faced with the reality of having their status change: from the oldest and biggest children in school, they had become the youngest and the smallest. Furthermore, the beautiful, brand new school came to be a huge school, overcrowded with students, most of them much bigger than they were. During recess time, the tiny outdoor space, the indoor pavilion, and the corridors were cramped with 1200 students, who played, talked, ran, and bumped into each other, filling the air with a deafening sound of voices, laughter and shouts. New and old mixed feelings arose, fed by new or old ambivalent representations. There was happiness for being in a new school, mixed with fear of the "big kids". They experienced the joy of learning new subjects with many nice teachers, but still had fear of tests, despite good marks. They felt sadness and injustice for not having permission to use some corridors or places that felt safer. Similarly to findings in studies carried out in Norway (Bjerke, 2011), children had a limited influence on management and rules concerning their life at school. In fact, they were not called to participate in such decision-making processes. Frequent conversational interviews, observations of recess time, and weekly participatory activity sessions were some of the most important opportunities to reinforce the relationship with the children and to collect data.

My status as an adult did not hinder the building of the role of "friend", but in fact, fostered it as those children were well acquainted with adults. Additionally, my status as a teacher did not intimidate children, but instead allowed me to be welcomed/"used" by them on many occasions, reinforcing my roles of "friend" and "atypical adult". From the beginning, the children started to show that they trusted me, and included me in the secondary adjustments they fabricated to deal with their fears and problems. Frequently, they asked me for a "ride" in order to go through areas where they were not allowed but they felt safer. They asked me to let them "help" me carry my belongings and, many times, it was difficult to find things for every "assistant". Then, instead, I gave them tasks: for instance, they had to go with me to receive some leaflets I had in the library (place where they wanted to stay but were not allowed to, because it was overcrowded).

- Can I carry your bag?
- Why?
- Because if I help you carry your bag, I can use the "forbidden stairs" instead of going to the playground. That's how we get a "ride".
- What about me, can I carry your computer?

- Let me carry your pencil case, please. (Field-notes, 8<sup>th</sup> November)

Affection marked my relationship with the children from the beginning and it grew during the school year. I was mostly considered as a person they could trust and not as a traditional teacher. They gave me things made by them (drawings, handmade key rings, objects folded out of paper). They confided in me some secrets, sorrows or joys (a punishment at home, the departure of a sister to work abroad, a good mark on a test).

The ways in which children saw me can undoubtedly be described as the role of "atypical adult" and "friend". Children kept giving meaning to my presence in the field, by assigning me social roles that were shaped throughout the school year, and different children represented me in different ways, as it normally happens in an ethnographic research (Costa, 1986). Referring to this process, Caria (1994) emphasizes that participants tend to adopt the researcher by assigning him/her a social role within the structure of social the relationships that they know. This act of adoption is improvised and updated according to the interactions. In fact, I was adopted by two girls. I became a mother and, for the first time, I became a grandmother.

At one point, Mariana called me:

- Teacher.

And she immediately added:

- It's so odd to call you that! I know you're a teacher, but you aren't my teacher and I don't think of you like that.

(Field-notes, 22<sup>nd</sup> November)

When the children and I were setting the tables for a lunch party, Mariana suddenly said:

- Hey, look, you've got so many daughters and sons!

During lunch she called me "mum" several times.

(Field-notes, 6<sup>th</sup> December)

In fact, she often called me mum during the whole school year.

I gained this daughter at lunch time, with many tasty sweets "calling" us. And it was a cake that created the opportunity for me to gain my first granddaughter.

Children and teachers were selling homemade cakes on the playground. Amélia, a very gluttonous girl, wanted one but she didn't have money. So I offered her one.

- I'll pay you back tomorrow.
  - No way. It's a gift.
- She hugged me tenderly and said:
- Oh, my dear, dear granny. I've got one more granny. (Field-notes, 16<sup>th</sup> February)

By the end of the year I tried to find out more about the roles that children gave to me. So I asked them to write down what I meant to them and how they would explain to a schoolmate who I was, and we also talked about that. The roles of "friend" and "atypical adult", the affection in the relationship and even the middle class origins of the children emerged from their answers. The task was not easy for most of them, for whom it was difficult to place me in the categories they usually use to classify adults. No more than three described me as a "teacher". Most of them, in the very middle-class-fashion of someone for whom university is not a big secret, answered that I was a PhD student (or some sort of student) who was studying their class. Some could not find a precise definition: "not quite a teacher", "almost a teacher". And my "granddaughter": "You are my adopted granny, very nice and friendly, not with the same value as the others, but very important too." Although every child seemed to have a perfect notion that I was studying (with) the class, one of them was perplexed when a friend said that I was studying THEM.

- Me - If you had to explain to a friend who I am, what would you say?  
 Rosa - You're studying us.  
 Sara - Are you stupid or something?  
 Are we objects?  
 Rosa (assertively and calmly) - We are not objects, but she is studying us.  
 (Participatory activities session, 22<sup>nd</sup> May)  
 On the other hand, Leonardo explained very clearly the way he saw the purpose of my study: "You're someone trying to find out who I am and what I think."  
 (Participatory activities session, 22<sup>nd</sup> May).

### Parents' views

Concerning the parents, who were mostly from the middle-class, the fact that I was a teacher, unexpectedly for me, did not seem to make them defensive out of fear of an intrusion into their lives and those of their children, or for fear of any sharing of information between myself and the teachers.

There was not a single parents' meeting in which one or more parents had not come to talk with me about my research with the class. They

conveyed different messages, but all of them were very rewarding. They praised the theme of my study, they offered me their help within their professional or personal skills, they thanked me for the work I was doing with their children, and they asked me how their children were doing in the sessions of participatory activities. Many of them even wanted to make it clear that they thought that I was bringing benefits to their children and specified how. Moreover, I obtained the same feedback in other occasional conversations or in interviews.

At the end of a parents' meeting, Paulo's mum approached me.

Paulo's mum - How's Paulo doing in your sessions?

Me (being honest but trying to keep the confidentiality I had promised the children) - Ok.

Paulo's mum - You know, he's so introverted that I'm glad he has decided to come. I also wish he had agreed to write a diary<sup>2</sup>, but he didn't want to. It's a pity. It would have been good for him, to express his ideas.

(Parent meeting, 17<sup>th</sup> April)

When the meeting ended, Catarina's mum told me that her daughter enjoys the sessions, and in her opinion, they are a great opportunity for children to socialize. Amélia's mum also said her daughter loves the sessions and she thinks they give children a fantastic chance to discuss issues that otherwise they wouldn't have the chance to debate. Moreover, she agrees that the socializing is very healthy.

(Field-notes, 12th January)

Me - Would you like to add anything else?

Isabel's mum - I would add that this work you're doing is very beneficial for everyone. Children develop social skills crucial to their development as human beings. They can decide if they want to come to a [participatory] session with you without feeling guilty. The other day my daughter told me she preferred not to come that day and she knew you wouldn't mind. They learn to

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<sup>2</sup> The children had been asked to write a diary for a week, for research purposes, with the expressed consent of their parents. Twenty of them fulfilled the task willingly.

make a decision and take responsibility for it. And I know that when they are worried about something they look for you and talk about the problem they feel. This is fantastic.

(Interview with Isabel's mother, 30<sup>th</sup> May)

Me – Would you like to add anything else?

Rui's father – I left this for the end, because it isn't the topic of our conversation, and I knew you wouldn't ask me. But I think that this work of yours has been interesting for the children. I think it's very positive. I think it was even good for their integration in school. Your [participatory] sessions are one more activity they do at school and they like! Though a personal project, I think your study also fulfils this function. It's an opportunity to be in school without the burden of being in a class. Regardless of how your research will continue, I think it has already been worth it, because these have been important moments for the children.

(Interview with Rui's father, 7<sup>th</sup> May)

Ethnographic research is "an exchange process, in which you give and receive" (Vasconcelos, 1997, p. 51). The quotes above are strong evidence that the parents looked at my research in this way. They also indicated that although parents rarely discussed their children's problems with integration in school with the class tutor, they were attentive and they attributed me with an important role of facilitator in this integration and socialization process.

Not only did all the kids want to cooperate with my research, but all of the parents also gave their consent and participated in everything I asked for, with one exception. The parents of one boy did not allow data collection with/on him (even when he showed that desire). However, they did not oppose my presence in the field and were always friendly to me.

The data collected with children and parents attest to the richness of the social relationships of investigation, which, despite several differences according to participants, is marked by a very positive common tone and willingness to cooperate in the research. The participants' theorization on the researcher (Silva, 2003) is clear, and, as Silva (2003, 2009b) posits, theory is a fundamental element to be captured in order to achieve better understanding. This paper intends to contribute to that reflection.

## Conclusions

Children proved to be competent and reflective interpreters of their own life experience, including the part concerned with the author's presence at school as a researcher, her research work, and her involvement in their everyday life. Her inclusion in their secondary adjustments was an example of their ability to reflect and strategically and intentionally use the resources available and to more appropriately get around some rules in order to feel better at school.

The researcher's professional status as teacher, which was known in the school where the research was carried out, was a challenge with methodological implications. In spite of the risks of the dual status of adult and teacher researching (with) child-students, the awareness of the risks and the adoption of suitable methodological and ethical procedures allowed for the overcoming of the predicted obstacles.

However, the teacher-researcher's sophisticated knowledge of the school and skills to communicate with children and to manage group work with them are fostering factors in order to successfully carry out in-depth research with children, at least in a school.

Thorough inside knowledge of school in general, and of that particular school, and a regular professional relationship with children, involves a double challenge when the teacher becomes a researcher: to defy the typical relationship of teacher-student and create distance and strangeness in relation to what is familiar and apparently does not seem worthy of questioning and reflection.

As it became clear, social class factors (the unexpected preponderance of middle class students) positively interfered in this study, both with regard to students and in relation to their parents. The verified cultural predisposition cannot fail to be emphasized. This predisposition is present in the way children and parents appropriated the research relationship for secondary adjustments and for specific social uses.

In sum: had the children not been viewed as legitimate social actors, had the social class of the researcher and the "researched" (namely, children and their families) not been similar (new middle class), and had the researcher had a different profession and/or age, then the investigation would have turned out to be completely different. In other words: the social relationship of research influences any investigation process and should always be taken into account by any researcher.

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