Teacher's Role in the Dynamics Between Self and Culture

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Scientific and literary texts are thick with narratives about the impact of teachers on students' psychological development. Numerous and diverse are the examples of such impact on children's and adolescent's lives, from the acquisition of cognitive skills, to the development of personal characteristics, to what we designate as the canalization of life trajectories. Even though we particularly stress the active participation of individuals in their own development—from the standpoint of a semiotic-cultural psychology—we also acknowledge the significant guiding role of cultural canalization processes over individual development. Cultural canalization processes constantly take place along the developing person's interactions with redundant social messages, or suggestions, especially those coming from relevant social others within the contexts of family and schools.

In the present chapter, we aim at highlighting teachers' role as part of the relevant cultural canalization processes that have a significant participation over students' life trajectories, and, therefore, over the development of the dialogical self-systems of children and adolescents. We will elaborate on the reciprocal, coconstructive nature of the dynamics that gives rise to the dialogical self within the context of specific cultures such as educational contexts. We will call the reader's attention to the micro and mesogenetic perspective on the issue, in order to reveal specific aspects of the ontogenesis, i.e., the emergence and development, of the person's dialogical self-system.

In our research and theoretical approach, we give substantial emphasis to the developmental dimension of the dialogical self-system. We will present and discuss our conceptualization of the dialogical self as a dynamic system consisting of a permanent flux of emerging, transforming and dissolving I/self positionings along

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irreversible time. Our focus in this chapter will be upon the emergence and transformation of the I/self positionings of those who participate of school contexts as students. Students consist of a very specific category of individuals, for they are constantly under the supervision, advice and evaluation of adults according to a set of standardized criteria, and, as we will see, such supervision, advice and evaluation are rooted on the very quality of each student's interactions and relationships with their teachers. It is notorious and undeniable that when a teacher appreciates—or likes—certain students for whatever reason, s/he tends to better evaluate and hold positive expectations towards them, creating interesting opportunities, and providing such students with important feedbacks, which have a powerful influence over their performance and self-esteem.

From a Cultural Psychological approach, we will then elaborate some theoretical and methodological contributions to understand the dynamics between self coconstruction and school culture with the fundamental mediation of the teacher. Particularly, we aim at making sense of how this dynamics develops along the specific students' trajectories, for very often the cultural canalization processes involved take place at a subtle and metacommunicative dimension of which teachers themselves are not very much aware. Consequently, this dimension needs to be identified and properly analyzed in order to unveil those processes that, usually non-intentionally, may guide self-development towards undesirable and problematic directions.

In this chapter, we analyze and discuss the relations between teachers and their students' self-development as we provide the reader with some empirical research illustrations of how teachers work as powerful catalysts within educational contexts in promoting constructive *versus* nonconstructive dialogical self-development regarding their students. Such self-development, though, may extend to other contexts beyond school boundaries, and, ultimately, it may entail the following of specific life trajectories. The active part played by the students, though, is also underlined along the text, as we build our ideas upon the notion of individuals as active and constructive beings. We rely on the contributions of Cultural Psychology (Valsiner), the Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans and others) and on our current research concerning the dialogical self-system development (Branco, 2015; Freire & Branco, 2017, in press; Roncancio-Moreno & Branco, 2015). Moreover, we aim at providing some guidelines for those in charge of children's education in order to help them to identify crucial aspects of their ongoing relationships, and consequently support their effort in fostering students' life trajectories towards happier and more constructive directions.

Cultural Canalization, Self, and the Quality of Student-Teacher Interactions

As educators and investigators of students' learning and development, we constantly verify that some students, along their school experience, follow healthier and more adaptive pathways than others. Within educational contexts, some demonstrate a

progressive positive development, while others end up failing—they fail to meet theirs and others' expectations concerning their academic performance and personal success. This not only happens due to individuals' differences and capabilities, but it frequently results from either excellent or problematic relationships the students develop with their teachers. Next, we elaborate on the basic processes that are responsible for such results, namely, the active internalization processes linked to cultural canalizations that occur within the framework of student-teacher's relationship.

Cultural Canalization and Internalization Processes

According to Vygotsky, internalization processes are central to human development (1978), as individuals bring to intra-psychological domains relevant aspects of their inter-psychological experiences. Since Vygotsky's seminal theoretical contributions, we conceive of internalization as a self-appropriation process characterized by transformations of the social suggestions by the active, coconstructive, and subjective participation of the person. Such transformations occur at both intentional and non-intentional levels of psychological functioning, and the internalized meanings may result similar or, on the opposite, contrary to the original social message that initiated the whole process. The crucial dimension of internalization processes lies on the affective quality of the message's source (Valsiner, 2014). However, even though individuals participate of internalization processes, the major impact of cultural canalization remains substantially powerful, due to their consistent guiding role in creating both significant goals and constraints along the reciprocal coconstruction of the personal (the subject) and collective cultures (social contexts) during a particular individual's ontogenesis.

Cultural canalization has an impact but does not determine human life trajectories. The foundation of a cultural psychology approach lies exactly on the dialogical interplay between determination and indetermination, between the likely results of certain canalization processes vis-à-vis the active actions and elaborations of each individual, plus the very indetermination of life events. The heterogeneous and plural quality of culture itself, associated with the non-predictable nature of events, always contribute to the tension between determinism and indeterminism. However, our task as researchers of human development consists of identifying and analyzing those experiences and processes that play relevant roles in guiding human developmental trajectories. Our theoretical elaborations on the teachers' role in this chapter, therefore, attempt to make sense of how specific experiences—namely, the student's interactions and relations with particular teachers—may end up having a fundamental effect over his/her self-development, which, on its turn, can fabricate the foundations of particular life trajectories.

Attentive, caring, and stimulating teachers who provide consistent and relevant positive feedback to the student cocreates a positive affective framework where the expectations are high, the empathy generates patience and, within such an affective relation, constructive self-meanings are constantly coconstructed, and internalized

by the student. On the other hand, irritated teachers who criticizes with impatience the student's mistakes, and who does not expect much from that particular student sends a continuous suggestion of low expectations and anticipates his/her failure, very much like along the lines that Rosenthal and Jacokbson predicted when they investigate what we designate as the self-fulfillment prophecy (Rosenthal & Jacokbson, 1968). However, we have to be careful in generalizing teachers' qualities and characteristics, because what really matters is the quality of the teacher's relationship with each, singular, student. Sometimes, even excellent teachers may not be aware of how they are sending subtle messages of doubt and distrust to particular students, and the consequences of such unawareness can be disastrous to the configuration of these students' dialogical self-system.

The Affective Nature of Semiotic Processes, Affective Semiotic Fields, and Dynamic Self-positionings

The processes of meaning construction occurring along communication and metacommunication between individuals are the primary object of study of psychological science from a cultural approach. The analysis and understanding of semiotic processes consist of the very phenomena we should investigate to make sense of human conduct—action—and the mental processes that characterize the *psyche* (Rosa, 2007). Even though most influential theorists acknowledge the importance of the affective dimension of human psychology in one way or another, cultural-historical theories inspired by Vigotski's ideas did not expand or elaborate further on the role of the affective dimension in the social coconstruction of culture and individuals. Sociocultural approaches to human sciences still continue to stress language, narrative, and observable activities in detriment to the study of emotions, feelings and human affectivity in general (Branco, 2015; Valsiner, 2007, 2014).

The comprehension that affects and cognition are parts of a same whole, as Vygotsky (1978) proposed, did not necessarily lead to the recognition and consequent investigation of how these dimensions actually merge and feed into each other to promote the emergence and continuous negotiation of meanings along the flux of human interactions and experiences. Therefore, Valsiner's ideas concerning the operation of an affective regulatory model for guiding meaning-making processes and actions comprise a very fruitful basis to make sense of the *psyche*, or the dialogical self-system as it is here conceived. For sure, many theorists dedicate their studies to investigate the role of teachers regarding children's and adolescents' development and education. However, from a semiotic-cultural coconstructivist approach to this subject (Valsiner, 2007, 2014), we want to unveil important aspects involved in the fundamental mediator role played by teachers concerning their students' dialogical self-system development.

The first aspect we underline is the power of communication and metacommunication. Metacommunication means communication about communication (Branco

& Valsiner, 2004), and it refers to the qualitative dimension of such interactions. The major problem people find regarding metacommunication is the difficulty to be aware of such processes, mostly found in the nonverbal messages they exchange during their interactions with each other. Metacommunication messages can be found in voice tones, facial expressions, postures, silences and gestures, but usually we tend to pay more attention to what we say instead of what we mean by what we say. For instance, I may say "Good job" with such voice intonation that I actually mean, ironically, "That's so ridiculous". Sometimes we are aware of what we do, but very often we do not. And this, within the context of a teacher-student relationship framework makes the whole difference.

The affective quality of the communicative relationship of teacher and students will guide meaning constructions related to diverse matters, but very specially, related to the self. In order to make sense of how this may happen, we developed the concept of Dynamic Self Positionings—DSP (Freire & Branco, 2017, in press; Branco & Roncancio-Moreno, 2014; Roncancio-Moreno, 2015), which are self positions dynamically and hierarchically organized within the configuration of the developing self-system. They relate to Hermans' concept of I-Positions (Hermans, 1987; Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Kempen, 1993), but theoretical, the DSP category is basically developmental, and fluid, and may be thought of as a kind of precursor to the concept of I-Positions. The Dynamic Self Positionings also relate, to some extent, to the traditional notions of self-perceptions, self-concepts, and self-esteem, and the major distinction between them is the dynamic and ever changing coconstructive quality of the Dynamic Self Positionings, the DSP.

What are the most important characteristics of a dialogical approach to the self? The dialogical self, comprised by the I/self-system as it relates to different voices (Bakhtin) and significant social others (Hermans), consists of a complex dynamic system created by distinct I/self positionings in a permanent process of semiotic negotiations at both intra and interindividual levels. Following James (1890/2007), the component "I" refers to the active, authorial aspect of the system, and the component "self", to its reflective aspect. Semiotic negotiations, though, do not only involve language, or the domain of verbal narratives; it mostly includes significant and empowered feelings and emotions, independently of any translation attempts of such feelings into verbal signs. In fact, as Valsiner claims, the most powerful signs reside at a post-verbal level that guides the interpretation of events, the definition of goals, and the individual's engagement in specific actions. This post-verbal level occupies the highest rank in the hierarchy of affective regulation of the *psyché.* Situated at this level we find values and prejudices that lead the way individuals interpret or make sense of world events, social messages, and of themselves. The power of all encompassing, difficult to describe values then orient meaning construction processes, particularly those concerning the self, and defy rationalization, rendering the attempts by others to convince the "believer" to change their views, perspectives, and convictions to usually fail. When someone deeply believes in certain "views of reality", or specific ways to interpret experiences, purely rational arguments and relevant information cannot change her/his understanding of the matter or situation.

The Teacher and the Emergence and Development of Dynamic Self Positionings

The reciprocal, coconstructive nature of the dynamics that gives rise to the dialogical self-system within the context of specific cultures requires a microgenetic perspective in order to reveal specific aspects of the ontogenesis and development of the person's self-system. In our research investigation, we give a substantial emphasis to the developmental dimension of the dialogical self-system as we focus upon the emergence and transformation of DSP in children and adolescents in preschool and in Elementary school contexts.

Next, we present and analyze two case studies drawn from our research data that illustrate our conceptual and theoretical points, thus serving as the basis for a discussion of the teacher's role in the dynamics between self and culture, our current topic.

Anderson

Anderson's case study was part of the research carried out by Monica Roncancio-Moreno and Angela Branco (Roncancio-Moreno & Branco, 2014) in Brasilia, Brazil. At the time of the research, Anderson was 6 years old and attended to a public preschool. The research goal was to deeply analyze a few case studies to make sense of children's self development during their transition from preschool to Elementary school. The study lasted for 1 year, from the last preschool semester through the first grade of a public school.

The boy was the only child of a couple that had recently moved to Brasilia due to his father, a military, transference to the capital of Brazil. His mother used to work as a teacher before moving to Brasilia, and was very frustrated for abandoning her work and becoming a housewife. Along the research period, we verified a tension between the couple that, most likely, did not help Anderson's life and self-development. Although the mother was a certified teacher and stayed at home, her relationship with Anderson was problematic, and she always complained about his delay in reading and writing (what was not actually true). According to the boy, the father was who usually helped him with his homework, played with him, and cheered him up.

In preschool, the situation was much more reassuring to the boy. The research methodological approach made use of multiple procedures in order to infer diverse indicators of DSP. According to research data—particularly constructed from interviews and direct observation in natural settings and semi-structured contexts—Anderson's relationship with the preschool teacher involved positive affective interactions. His performance in class activities was good, and his relationships with teacher and peers were good and satisfactory. Anderson seemed to enjoy his time at preschool. Communication and metacommunication between the child and the teacher occurred within the framework of a harmonic and empathic relationship.

Research provided evidence that Anderson's teacher promoted appropriated pedagogical strategies with the child, giving him individual attention and cheering him up whenever he encountered difficulties in completing his tasks.

At preschool, he was happy with himself and with his competence as a learner. In the excerpt below, we find indicators of a DSP as "I am smart", in reference to his self-perception as a good reader:

Researcher: (after a dialogue about intelligence)… and who would be the least intelligent kid in your class?

Anderson: William is.

R: Why?

A: Because he does not anything about reading. He only knows something about numbers to count, sometimes…(pauses)

R: What about you? Do you know about numbers?

A: *Yes! I even know how to read!* (speaks with pride and confidence)

R: You know how to read?

A: Yes, some stuff! (confidence tone)

Anderson, along the above interview, makes explicit that to be intelligent is to know how to read. Later on, during a different activity proposed by the researcher, the following dialogue took place:

A: Auntie (teacher), do you have a painting brush?

R: I do, but I don't know if we can write here… (on a small blackboard)

A: *I know how to write!* (aloud, with enthusiasm)

(…)

R: Who are the most intelligent boys of your class?

A: *Those who know how to read.*

In the first grade, however, things changed completely. Anderson began to demonstrate insecurities and sadness in situations that involved learning how to write and read. His new teacher was harsh and defiant with the boy, and constantly let Anderson know about her dissatisfaction and irritation with his performance. In the following example, we find the teacher orienting Anderson during a writing activity denominated "fill in the letters".

Anderson: Auntie (teacher), how do I write LE?

Teacher: (irritated with arms crossed) You! (she addresses another child) Tell him how we write LE.

Child: L and E.

Teacher: (talking to Anderson using a cranky tone) L and E, LE!

Anderson looks at the teacher with a fearful and sad expression.

In the excerpt above, we can identify two major characteristics in teacher's communication and metacommunication with the boy, which were present in various occasions: one related to the promotion of feelings of incompetence in the child, and the second, was her endorsement of competition among students. In general,

the quality of her interactive frame with Anderson involved an inquisitorial attitude, which made clear how upset she was about the boy's questions and difficulties. In the above excerpt, when she asks Anderson's classmate to tell him the right letters, she promotes a socialization practice based on competition. In addition, her distinctive irritated tone, often used when addressing the boy, downplayed Anderson's competence before his classmates. She places Anderson in a situation of disadvantage, and makes sure he will feel bad about his lack of knowledge. His colleague, who usually answers all teacher's questions, was at that time reading and writing, and the teacher used him as the example of the ideal student, not only to Anderson but also to the entire group. In other words, she requested his peer's "help" just to point out the boy's ignorance.

The approach used by the teacher with Anderson neglected his capacity and motivation, because Anderson, in previous observations, had already shown that he did know the letters, and was able to form some words. Here, we can raise the hypothesis that, since she was convinced of the boy's incompetence, she did not pay attention to his progress and incipient abilities. The teacher's attitude was affecting Anderson self-concept in a negative way, and the occurrence of such experiences and feelings led the child to assume a *DSP* as an incompetent person.

During an activity, the teacher asked children to write the names of the object each child took from a box. Anderson picked up a toy frog, and asked for a peer's help.

> *Anderson asks William*: 'Do you know how to write frog? (William says he does not)
>
> The teacher moves around the classroom checking their performance. She scolds the children for playing with the objects and talking. She says, "The only one who cannot understand this is Maurice (a mentally handicap student), everybody else can understand! I said you cannot play with the toys!". Then she approaches Anderson's desk. He says, in desperation, "I don't know how to write!", and starts crying. The teacher tells him the right letters to write the word "frog".
>
> On a different occasion, the following dialogue takes place:
>
> *Teacher* screams: Hey, Anderson, why is this name so big? You erase it and do it again! (very irritated tone)
>
> Children continue with their work, she approaches Anderson and she herself erases his writing.
>
> *T*: VERY ugly! (loud and angry tone)
>
> (…)
>
> After a while, Anderson asks the teacher:
>
> *A*: Auntie, would you please help me! (tense, nervous tone)
>
> She does not look at him, or answers to his request. After a while, she reprimands him:
>
> *T* screams at A: Do it, Anderson! You did not write the right letters, they are all on here, Anderson! (irritated tone, pointing to the blackboard)

The impact of such experiences with the teacher were verified in conversations with the boy, like when the researcher and other children were talking about a story the researcher had just told them. The researcher asked:

R: Who knows how to read here?

Gisele: My sister does!

A: I can only read a little bit…

R: Do you know how to read, Anderson?

A: Just a few words…

(…)

R: And to write? Who knows how to write?

A: I do! (smiles). No…no, no, I don't know how to read some words…but I know how to write…

(…)

A: I am good at writing, a little bit…I am good in helping (people).

The emergence of the *DSP* as "I am an incompetent reader" is here revealed with ambivalence and insecurity, and he tries to save face saying he "knows how to write". Later on,

R: How are your tasks in the classroom?

A: Hu….. we have to read, to write…

R: Do you already read and write?

A: No. The auntie is the one who writes so we write.

The way the teacher deals with his insecurity may be disastrous when we think about Anderson's future, since he cannot count of his mother to neutralize teacher's negative expectations.

The meanings underlying the pedagogical practices of the teacher revealed her belief on individualistic performances and competitive motivation. Unfortunately, there is a traditional approach in education used by many teachers, and very much in opposite direction to research findings, which rely on severely criticizing the child's mistakes as a method to encourage learning. In fact, such ruthless criticism does not work as an effective feedback; on the contrary, it functions as a punishment directed to the student as a subject, as a person. It hits the student's *self*, and not just a specific, discrete performance. This explains why the target of such criticisms easily becomes known as the "stupid" kid, the "lazy" student, the "slow" learner, and so on. Needless to say the impacts of such approach on the self-esteem and self-evaluations of the pupil, i.e., his/her *DSP*.

However, many are the motives for the observable actions of Anderson's teacher. Another possible reason for her total lack of patience with Anderson could be due to his mother strong criticism of the school (therefore, the teacher's) practices, she had complained to the teacher that the school was not doing a good job. Hence, the teacher might be reacting to the child with hostility due to his mother's criticisms, trying to prove to everyone that Anderson was indeed a poor learner. In teacher's narratives, the researcher noticed that she was also under a lot of pressure by the demands of the school system concerning children's literacy processes. In sum, educational contexts are impregnated with complex and controversial meanings, which are poorly identified and negotiated, therefore resulting in a systemic meanings network where

different individual and collective cultural goals and values are involved, and often diverge with each other.

Anderson's case demonstrates how his teacher's expectations and practices, together with his mother's negative anticipation of his progress, promoted his failure in the same direction and generated, in the child, a strong sense of incompetence. During preschool, his mother's voice (her narratives along the interview) communicated her expectations about the boy's failure, but her negative anticipation was somewhat neutralized by the voices of the preschool teacher and the father, and by Anderson's positive affective interactions with both of them. Teacher and father believed in Anderson's competences and capacity to develop. Consequently, in preschool he managed to resist the negative messages from the mother, and, in that educational context, he was able to position himself positively, and was quite sure about his skills concerning reading and writing. Anderson's *Dynamic Self Positioning* as a good learner at that time could be inferred from the interviews, when he said he "knew how to read" and "how to write", demonstrating his security and positive meaning making about himself, as mentioned above.

When he moved to the 1st grade, though, the difficult relationship with the teacher ended up contaminating his relationships with his peers, and the boy—who used to be very proud of being a good friend to his peers at preschool—was, then, left alone. The teacher, always angry, communicated by verbal and nonverbal signs—such as words, actions, facial expressions, and voice tone—her permanent dissatisfaction with Anderson's performance, increasing the child's tensions and anxiety. Consequently, in the first grade, the convergence of all such messages (mother's negative expectations, teacher's lack of empathy and patience, the distancing from peers), plus the change of the rules—in Elementary school, academic performance was the most valued competence—had a significant and powerful impact on Anderson's self development. A new self-configuration emerged, in which Anderson succumbed to the anticipation of failure and began to doubt his own competence. In school, a lot of suffering marked his literacy process and his self-evaluations focused on "I don't know how to read", "I am a poor learner" self- depreciation *DSP*.

Another excerpt from Anderson's interviews during Elementary school, reproduced below, suggest how important it is to keep in mind the role and responsibilities of educators, who rarely take a time to worry about their student as a person, as a subject that also develops beliefs and values other than academic performance. The researcher asked him about his anticipations of the future:

R: What do you want to do when you grow up?

A: Firefighter. I wanted to be a thief (laughs), but I changed my mind…

R: Why did you want to be a thief before?

A: Because a thief can get everything he wants…

R: But isn't that wrong?

A: To be a thief is wrong…

R: But he…

A: He steals things, then it is wrong…I wanted to have jewelry, to steal jewels…but not anymore (laughs)

R: What do you want to be now?

A: A firefighter.

R: What a firefighter does?

A: He puts out fires…

In Anderson case, mother and teacher, in the first grade, inhibited the boy's developmental trajectory by anticipating his failure at school. However, if the teacher resisted his mother's influence, and tried to be aware of the child's difficulties, feelings, and developmental possibilities, his self-development could go in a different direction, towards a sense of worth and competence that is essential to achieve success and happiness. That is, if she considered Anderson as a human being, an individual in need of support for his self-development, and not just an "efficient reader" that resulted from her pedagogical efforts, she would have had the chance to sum up with Anderson's father to neutralize his mother's negative expectations. However, the meanings and affect that impregnated her relationship with the child were rigid, and frequently disqualified Anderson's as a person, closing opportunities and possibilities for his personal development as a whole.

Anderson's consists of an example where the teacher could have made a significant difference to the child's self-development, demonstrating the school potential to neutralize and counteract eventual family's cultural canalizations of lack of self-worth.

In the example analyzed above, the difficulties of a child's process of literacy led to many problems in his coping with the new educational context. The lack of awareness and empathy of his teacher, also, might contribute to a history of failure at school, and contribute to a problematic life trajectory. Anderson is an example of how strong anticipations of failure may affect children's self-development and developmental trajectories.

Richard

Richard was 11 years old and attended to the fifth grade of a primary school in the city of Brasilia, Brazil. He was part of a 1-year study carried out by Sandra Freire and Angela Branco in his class (Freire & Branco, in press). We selected nine students as case studies to investigate children's positionings about themselves (*DSP*) along the year. They participated in individual interviews conducted in the beginning and after the term of the academic year, when students who succeed moved to the sixth year. There were also focus group sessions, direct observations of daily routines and special activities designed by teachers to promote disclosure and negotiations among children. There were also interviews with the teacher. Most procedures were video recorded. For the present purpose, we selected Richard's case.

In class, Richard was initially timid, but during the interviews, he seemed well at easy, and his narratives about himself and others, including his self-evaluations, were very rich and interesting. Considering the coconstructed data from his first and

second individual interviews, carried out with the help of drawing activities, Richard moved from positioning himself as a non-intelligent student to someone confident about being smart and intelligent, a capable learner able to succeed at school. The following analysis targets issues such as the fading and the emergence of specific *DSP* along his experiences, as well as the identification of the fundamental role played by his teacher in such change. The teacher provided for an affective, constructive relational framework characterized by a constant and genuine dialog with the boy, lots of incentive, and mutual respect. In the first interview, which occurred during the first quarter of the school year, he relies on the teacher's voice to emphasize aspects of the developing self:

In1_Ri_08'04"

Researcher: So, have you ever attended tutoring sessions for any special subject before?

Richard: Only in the fourth grade, I went to tutoring lessons in Portuguese. Because of the same problems I have, to copy and… [pause] You know: My spelling is wrong sometimes. That's it. [suddenly changes his posture and glances to the researcher]. But now I am better (…). [and adds in a firmer tone:] The teacher said [nods, convincingly].

Re: How do you know you are getting better?

Ri: Oh [expressive, long vowel], last year I did not like Portuguese [shakes his head]. In grammar, I did not even understand the questions, and I had to ask the teacher, and… [pause; changes tone of voice]. Now, in, in, in Portuguese? I understand everything. I can study the book all by myself and, and, now, I am better, now. (…)

In1_Ri_20'44"

Re: What are your favorite subjects or topics in school?

Ri: Mathematics and Portuguese. I need to get better in relation to these issues, you know… [mimics with head and hands referring to spelling] But in Mathematics? The teacher said I am an expert! [vibrant tone, nods proudly]

In the position as a student, Richard's metacommunication—described inside the brackets—informs he is still very sensitive with a condition from his close past. The qualifications he had as a student due to his lack of competence in writing seems to be devastating to his self-system. Writing is, perhaps, the most significant literacy practice with high power of canalizing life trajectories at the beginning of schooling. Richard seems to be fighting against an unsettling self-feeling tamed by his early years' literacy experiences. Pauses, silence, mimics (instead of verbalizing), glances, and posture changes, as well as narration discontinuities are indicators of the emotional influence of writing practices in the constitution of his self. Problems in writing (spelling), that he has not yet completely solved; the link of writing as a literacy practice to the subject of Portuguese, specifically, grammar; the lack of resources for understanding a question which implies the dependence on the teacher, and on her affective ways of responding to his demands. Most of all, he faces the feeling of inferiority and social exclusion that has been noted in the direct observations of the classroom routine.

The recurrence of "getting better" in the boy's narrative, in this first interview, is linked to the voice of the teacher. It functions as a sign to support him to build

new perspectives for a future self. Apparently, that moment was characterized by this redundant message (to get better), as the teacher sets semiotic goals to the boy, such as "being an expert in Mathematics". As she does that, she provides semiotic guidance and emotional conditions for Richard to become more engaged with his own process of development. He has reached the point in which he acknowledges some independence and agency: "I understand everything. I can study the book all by myself."

In the following excerpt during the second interview, after the end of the year, he does an interesting self-critique about the same topics, and analyzes his sense of self in relation to his achievements and performance practices. Some of his accounts for his own changes were: "You know, at the beginning, I was lazy, I did not know how to calculate, divide, these things. Then, I saw how much I learned; I would go solve the exercises on the blackboard, and got them all right! And the teacher would always praise me, saying good things." There is a different tone, a distance from his older self, and a confident positioning about some of his current skills and competences. There is reference to the teacher's appraisal as an important remark, but her voice is not so evident in his narration as in the first interview. The dialog continued as it follows:

In2_Ri_34'16"

Researcher: You said a lot about your performances in Mathematics, what about Portuguese?

Richard: Oh, I am terrible! [emphasis, facial contortion] I understand everything, like that [snap his right hand fingers], but when it gets to doing homework, I do not know anything else. Portuguese does not get into my head!!! That's why I don't like it! [emphatic]

Re: Well, [surprised look, slow talk] but I remember that you had a good performance in writing…

Ri: Oh [interrupts], but I only wrote about others' ideas, from books. I wrote, I got ideas in my head and the ideas from the books. But then, I could write only as a homework. Because, because, [pause] I do not like Portuguese, no way! [closing tone]

(…)

Re: And, what about all the writing you had to do in class?

Ri: Well, I even liked poetry a little, but I did well because I made the posters [for individual presentations] and the teacher praised me. [he sounds and seems content] Also, everybody [students] would say that the poster was beautiful, that the text was interesting, that they did not know about this or that. Just like that. [smiles and glances at the researcher]

Re: What kind of feedback did you get from the teacher about it on your final report [evaluation]?

Ri: Oh, it [the report] said that I am good, that I am an artist, that I need to get better in Portuguese, that I am intelligent, this sort of things.

Here, there is an interesting conflict, about which the interviewer does not seem to be aware of during the interview. When she mentions Portuguese as a discipline, Richard directly connects it to grammar and language conventions, while she addresses writing practices. Concerning writing, she specifically refers to text creation but the two dimensions of Portuguese, grammar conventions and creative text, do not have a clear-cut distinction to the student, and the particular skills and practices demanded in each dimension of the discipline are mixed in primary schooling.

Only later, in the Brazilian standard curriculum (high school level), the discipline will transform into three different courses (areas): literature, writing and grammar.

As noted in the analysis of the previous excerpt, the unsettling feeling regarding Portuguese during Richard's early school trajectory is caused by grammar-based language practices. He shows a specific hypergeneralized affection towards the discipline Portuguese, and this semiotic construction is highly grounded in the uncomfortable feelings regarding his competences in this particular field originated in his early school experiences. This has visible consequences in his engagement in grammar-based activities or tasks, to which he presents a resistant positioning: "Portuguese does not get into my head!" Here, it is worth investigating the way the meanings of certain disciplines are culturally canalized by some students. Even the teacher, when she writes in the final report that he has to improve in Portuguese, she might be referring to Grammar. Therefore, the way the teacher understands and interprets literacy development, as in this case, guides the way she canalizes the discipline's meaning as a sign during learning practices.

However, Richard gives a detailed account of literacy practices that involved sophisticated ways of producing texts, multiple modes of print and oral communication practices in the classroom, such as images, drawings, writings, and, most interestingly, a dialogic context for reciprocal feedback on student's production and performances. The whole context in which literacy experience takes place seems to make him happy, he seems to enjoy it, for it is the space for a constructive subjective qualification of himself, and a sense of purposefulness regarding that learning activity. He positions himself as confident about his qualities and his place in school, at the same time that he remains critical and reflective in a sense that enables him to openly disclosure his feelings towards a disliked discipline. Semiotic canalization of life trajectories may or may not change the deep meanings, and affective rooted feelings for a cultural object generated in past experiences. Nevertheless, it is always possible to build alternative affective conditions for new possibilities and outcomes directed to the future. In the second interview, Richard recurrently mentioned how happy he was to have changed so much along that year. When the interviewer asked him to draw whatever he liked the best, and the least, about school, he asked "Well, may I draw the whole school?", and finalized "There is nothing about the school I do not like! (emphasis)."

One powerful feature for culture canalization is the existence of a space for dialogs, which enables the circulation of meanings concerning learning practices, social values and personal relationships. Discussions and negotiations sometimes entail conflicts and polemics that require a lot of awareness and sensitivity by the teachers and adults in the role of mediators. It is within conversational contexts that students are able to develop dialogical resources and become aware of the importance of the relational dimension of life in all senses, including life at the school context.

In1_Ri_03'25"

Researcher: What are your favorite activities in school?

Richard: Look, there are three. Informatics, group work and individual work are the activities that let you know if you are ready (prepared).

Re: Prepared for what?

Ri: To go to the sixth grade, to become someone in life, right?

Re: So, tell me more about it (the individual work).

Ri: Look, these individual works (…) are called tests. In fact, they (the teachers) work with written reports, not with grades.

Re: Then? What?

Ri: It is like this. It is because the teacher´s report is like a story about us, about how we are doing in school. Then, if we make a test and we go well then she writes about it in the report, that we are doing well in this and that subject matter, if we do not talk too much, how we behave, this kind of things.

Re: And how do you think you are doing so far?

Ri: Well, the teacher says that my behavior is good, right? But it needs to get better.

One particular feature of Richard's school—the existence of an institutionalized dialogical practice—seemed to contribute with his teacher's efforts to motivate and encourage students with difficulties. The school developed a specific assessment practice to implement a new approach to students' evaluation. This approach, even though established by the latest educational official norms and national standards for education, is rarely put in practice in Brazilian schools. It is a form of participatory evaluation grounded on continuous and formative assessments by teachers, students' self-assessment, and peer feedbacks. The law also determines (a) the automatic promotion during the literacy cycle up to the third grade; (b) the exclusion of grading systems—in form of letters or numbers—from public schools up to fifth grade; and (c) the law demands that students' achievements are informed by all-encompassing written reports. The norms also require that every school carries out and develops a permanent forum known as *Conselho de Classe Participativo* (Class Participatory Council), or CPC, that functions as a systematic open board forum with the participation of all school sectors (teachers, students, staff, parents, and community). In Richard's school, the CPC actually met and worked, it had an important impact on the identification of problems, negotiation of conflicts, organization of institutional routines, and on the evaluative practices of everyone, in and across classrooms.

In Richard's first interview, he talks about the CPC. His speech informs about his perspective on such practice as he narrates an episode about a friend.

In1_Ri_30'01"

Researcher: What do you think about the CPC?

Richard: I think it is good.

Re: Why?

Ri: Well, it is good, because we can express everything, we can talk about the staff, about our classmates. Because, if there were anything wrong and no CPC, everything would just remain in our heads. We would not be able to talk in order to improve, to find a solution, to get better and better.

Re: So, tell me an example, about something you think that has changed because of the CPC.

Ri: Hum… For example, Todd, well, because before… (pause). He was not … (pause, looks at the interviewer). He was lazy, just like me. Then he went (decided) and changed. Now, he is better also. Once there was an assistant and she was supposed to watch us during the

> intermission, and sometimes, you know, we would get hurt, right? We would go to her to ask for ice, and she would tell us: "No way, boy, I will not give you anything; you get hurt because you want to. Move on, get out." Then we talked about it in one CPC. Everybody was always complaining about her. Then, she was dismissed from school.

The CPC is a dialogical learning, coconstructive practice. It sets a space for the necessary negotiation of all sorts of problems and conflicts, and it provides a context for cognitive and moral development. The cultural canalization of school values can be there analyzed and discussed, together with the pedagogical ideals and educational goals. It provides discursive tools for elaborating meanings about children's routines and occurrences (Todd was lazy and changed; the staff assistant was rude and was fired). Most importantly, it sets a welcome context for the expression of feelings and self positionings. There, Richard was able to see others and relate to their problems, elaborating on meanings to interpret himself: "(Todd) was lazy like me … now he is also better like me". In sum, the CPC provided an important relaxed context for students to express themselves, talking about self and others' feelings, what helped to elaborate possibilities of alternative self-meanings and actions. As Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) put it, "an emotion is influenced not only by its positional history, but also by its positional context" (p. 262). Therefore, affectively comfortable positional contexts do help to foster constructive self-development in students.

We extracted the following excerpt from the second focal group session, in which Richard, Paul, Robert, and Maurice participated. They were talking about the CPC, and the researcher asks them a question that triggers a very interesting answer by the students:

Ref. GF_07_04

5'01"	Researcher:	Now I am curious about one thing. In the story, all of you think that Pilar was the best student in the class, don't you? Do you think there is one best student in your class?
	All of them: Richard: Robert:	No, no one! Everyone has the capacity to learn. Yap! That's it!

Their convergent thinking about the fact that no student should be considered better than another tells a lot about the cooperative framework of Richard's class, and the knowledgeable and smart way the teacher dealt with her students, both in the classroom and in the CPC, as the coordinator. Hence, Richard's teacher was doing a very good job in encouraging her students' self-development.

In sum, affective semiotic processes occurring during communication processes are central to cultural canalization that leads to the coconstruction of beliefs and values, and teachers have a powerful influence on such processes. Notwithstanding, this does not mean that values—or deep affect-laden beliefs—already canalized cannot change. They can and they do, but not in face of cognitive elaborations, logical arguments or rational claims. They may change due to new experiences and

affective re-elaborations of the self-system vis-à-vis certain life experiences. Those deeply and ingrained affective self-related grounds for interpretation and meaning construction need to be shaken or defied by powerful new feelings, and only then significant changes may occur. If we bring this discussion into the classroom context, we may find teachers who believe they cannot do better because they already are exceedingly good. Furthermore, there are teachers who believe that most of their students are not brilliant or interested enough to actually learn, or teachers that strongly believe that specific students will fail (or succeed). The same happens with children or adolescents: we find some students that believe they are completely stupid and will never learn, and, also, students who believe authority figures will always lie to young people; therefore, there is no reason to take teachers seriously; and so on and so forth.

A relevant aspect to consider in the analyzes given above is the fact that all those deep beliefs (personal values) are most likely developed along years of interactions and relationships with particular significant others. Consequently, to understand how such values come up during each subject's life trajectory requires the investigation of people's interactions (in the here and now), relationships (along a history of interactions), and experiences. In the case of educational contexts, this major endeavor turns out to be difficult, but it is not impossible, due to our access—as researchers—to the environment where such interactions and relationships take place and are daily negotiated.

Teacher-Student Relations: Perspectives and Contributions

In this chapter, we aimed at elaborating some theoretical contributions to the investigation of the role of teacher's practices and personal relationships with her students, as we analyzed some empirical data drawn from our research on the emergence and development of the dialogical self-system. We gave a special focus upon how the teacher may play a central part in the promotion *versus* inhibition of each student's self-development. We argued that the teacher's role is of extreme relevance in the dynamics that occur between self and school culture, and how its analysis particularly helps to make sense of the way this dynamics may contribute to singular and specific student's trajectory.

Even though teachers are not the sole reason that explains such trajectories, their role cannot be overestimated: some students do follow healthier and more adaptive pathways along their educational experience, while others end up failing in terms of academic performance and personal success. In both cases, such experiences may have a powerful impact over the individual's *Dynamic Self Positionings* as schooling progresses along the years.

As we argued along the chapter, the semiotic-cultural coconstructivist approach, elaborated by Valsiner with emphasis on human affectivity, can be very useful to reveal the central role teachers play concerning the development of the *Dynamic Self Positionings*, and what are the processes and mechanisms therein involved. The

Dynamic Self Positionings are psychological constructs intrinsically associated with success or failure, happiness or misery. Is it possible to suggest some guidelines for teachers in order to foster students' self-development and life trajectories towards happier and more constructive directions? We believe that in this chapter we suggest some ideas that can actually be fruitful and useful.

In a few words, the teachers need to actually believe and fully understand their roles, and therefore carefully observe and monitor the quality of their relationship with each of her/his student. They need to pay attention to the possible ways they are promoting self-fulfillment prophecies, and constantly correct their actions to expect for the best from their students. Then, individually knowing each student's talents and difficulties, teachers will be able to plan and provide specific opportunities to support every student's dialogical self development, being aware of how positive affectivity and the expression of high expectations towards each student do have a significant impact and can make all the difference.

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