

Identity of the difference. Social and schoolexperiences.

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ABSTRACT: This work shows some of the results obtained in the doctoral thesis “Pedagogy of Possibility. Narrative study on the educational and resilient process of two people diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome”, which are linked to the identity construction processes experienced by Isabel and Emmit (two people diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome). The results presented have emerged from the life stories of two people diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. The life stories have been written from a series of individual and group (family) interviews, returns and co-interpretation of the narratives that have taken place over three years (2014/17). The co-interpretation of life stories has allowed us to see the displacement (school and social) that Isabel and Emmit have experienced, and how these experiences have configured an identity of difference in both. The behaviors – social and school– shown by Isabel and Emmit have caused a social, school, educational displacement ..., a fact that has led them to isolation and school and social exclusion, configuring an identity of difference that has had repercussions on their social, psychological and professional development.

KEYWORDS: Education, Narrative-biographical methodology, bullying, Asperger's Syndrome, Identity of the difference.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Identity is an inherent characteristic of every individual, its multi-expressive and inconclusive character is perceived in (1) the social, communicative, psychomotor and cognitive manifestations –among others– that people show, as well as (2) in its constructive character, because "we are always someone to do" [1, p.108]. Therefore, and from a socio-constructivist perspective, we have to consider that it makes no sense to conceive a static and immutable identity model [2]

Identity is a subjective, personal, social and evaluative perception, which is configured based on circumstances, experiences and the way in which subjects interact with their immediate contexts [3].

Identity construction is a relational, multidimensional, continuous, endless constitutive process that has a social and personal character that is built and transformed throughout the individual's life trajectory, since “our present identity is not, then, an event sudden and mysterious, but a result of a life story” [4, pp. 155-156]. From a socio-constructivist perspective we have to take into account that identity is a complex, endless and multidimensional process that is in continuous construction [5], which is inexhaustible [6], because:

we are inhabited by presences and absences, we are always "someone to do", someone who "is doing" in each of their situations and through their relationships. We never start from scratch nor are we definitively finished, because neither our situations nor our relationships with others, with the world and with ourselves, are, nor can they be, absolutely closed [1, p. 108].

In the particular case of people diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, we must consider that since the past decade and as a consequence of a collective movement of identity construction, different groups have arisen made up of people diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome who prefer to use the concept "Aspie" to call themselves and define themselves as a collective [7]. This self-denomination allows them to differentiate themselves from people called “neurotypical” and to feel identified and understood, because, as a group, they understand that they are different [8], and their social, school, psychological and educational needs are also different.

As we will see in the next few pages through the stories of Isabel and Emmit, identity is built from the experience(s), and self-identification processes carried out by the individual –based on that experience–, either from collectively when they perceive common traits with a group, “heterorecognition” [9], or individually when these are associated with a particular self-perception and difference in relation to others, “self-recognition” [9]. As Morales, Páez, Deschamps and Worchel states, identity is defined "as a set of very specific opinions, judgments and attitudes that a person manifests with respect to himself" [10] where their self-perception

character will allow individuals to identify themselves, or not, with a certain group, configuring their personal, social, school and professional identity. In this sense, we must consider that the influence of the context is going to be a determining aspect in the identity configuration since “each subject is developing his identity in a process of individual reconstruction of the conditions of the context in which he develops” [11, p.124] affecting the configuration of their identity and social, school and professional development.

II. METHODOLOGY

The results presented below have emerged from the life stories of Isabel and Emmitt, we must consider that narrative research revalues experience, memory and the relationships that occur in narrative acts [12]. From an epistemological perspective, life stories are linked to the biographical-narrative [13, 14; 11] provides us with a vision positioned about a given reality [15] and they bring us closer and facilitate the understanding of other realities, complexities and situations.

Participants and protagonists of the research

The research is focused on the life stories of Isabel and Emmitt, two people diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. We approach two stories marked by various school and social experiences that have shaped their respective identities and life trajectories.

Isabel

Isabel was born in 1992, in 1995 she began her schooling in early childhood education and experienced her first school labeling being classified by her teacher as a “selective mutism student”. As a consequence of the passive attitude of some of his teachers, he began to show school difficulties and to have to stay a year in the fourth grade of primary education.

She began his Secondary Education studies in 2001, the following year the first episodes of bullying began, a situation that lasted for two years due to the passivity of the educational center. After leaving behind a series of significant school and social experiences (bullying, school and clinical diagnosis, school difficulties ...). In 2010 she began her studies for a degree in History at the University of Malaga. When she is finishing her university studies (2015) she begins to show her family his pictorial and literary creations.

Her creative ability and motivation to learn led her to begin her formal training in graphic design and creative writing. In 2016 she began her career as a writer, a fact that led her to win a literary award in 2017, to continue her training and to continue creating and producing literary and pictorial material.

Emmitt

Emmitt was born in 1985, in 1989 when he was a 4-year-old preschool student, he was diagnosed with autism. This fact caused him to start attending “Special Education” classes in 1991. Throughout 1994 Emmitt experienced different episodes of bullying that were quickly eliminated by the school management. In 1995 he came into contact with a series of history books that made him start to be interested in history. He began his studies in Secondary Education in the year 2000, this change of stage and school center (new teachers, classmates, norms, academic difficulty, new episodes of bullying...) triggers situations of anxiety that affect their academic and social development.

In 2004 he took a degree in History, during this year Emmitt was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and joined the Malaga Asperger Syndrome Association (AMSA) and began to participate in the different activities developed by the association. He left the degree in 2009 and took it up again in 2010 with the support of his family and people from the association.

The investigative process

From an inquiring narrative position [16], I consider that knowledge is not discovered by the researcher, but rather it is constructed [17] through collaborative and horizontal work between investigated individuals and researchers

Over three years (2014/17), 16 interviews were carried out, both individual (Isabel and Emmitt) and in groups (their respective families) in a process that has had various phases.

1- Field work. Cyclical stage that has occupied the first three years and that has been characterized by (1) conducting interviews; (2) transcription; and (3) return –individual or group, depending on the case– of the interviews.

2- Interpretation. Since the completion and return of the first interviews, the first analytical categories and their pre-interpretation and co-interpretation have emerged together with Isabel, Emmitt and their families.

Throughout the second phase, the analytical process has been developed, the analysis has advanced through a natural progression that has gone from the particular to the common; that is, from a singular logic (intra-case) to a transversal logic (inter-case) [18]. From the analysis of particular cases (singular logic), common categories or dimensions have emerged to these (inter-case), which has allowed emerging categories to be generated that have been triangulated because they coincide between the stories of Isabel and Emmit.

From among all the categories that have emerged we proceed to analyze in this work the stories that revolve around the subcategory social and school identity.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The life stories of Isabel and Emmit bring us closer to the different experiences that throughout their first years of life have built an “identity of difference”, because as we pointed out in another work, identity is a social construction in permanent transformation, and is configured from the recognition and belonging that the subject himself elaborates in relation to himself and others [3].

Identity of the difference in the social context

Social and personal experiences are going to be crucial in the formation of identity –in a particular way–, since identity is socially constructed and configured in the relationships that each individual establishes with their group [19]. This relationship is based on “expected” and “normalized” social behaviors by their social group, and where diversity –cultural, sexual, religious, communicative, functional ...– is expressed under (1) manifest –explicit– and “normalized” signs, which facilitates their understanding and social and particular acceptance; and (2) particular attitudes and behaviors linked to identity and which are constantly questioned for not adapting to a socially expected pattern.

At times I played with boys and girls, but if I went one day and did not go the other, they asked me, they told me I spoke strangely, the other children always asked me many questions. A lot of people seem to resent the idea of not being receptive to their affection, and it's something I don't think has to be justified. I don't feel like I have an obligation to explain anything, I'm just like that, I show my affection in my own way (Isabel).

I was frustrated because I couldn't understand what was happening to me. As a child I had some idea that something was wrong with me, because I noticed that I was not like the others. I have had bad experiences and gaffes throughout my life that made me very embarrassed. Every time I was scolded for doing something wrong, I had the impression that something was wrong with me and that I was different from others. Every time I was called to my attention by some mistake, the people around me looked at me as if they were judging me. In those moments I believed that I was the only one to whom those things happened. I was always wondering what was really happening to me, why did these things happen to me? I felt different from the others, I was a shy, quiet person, who followed patterns of behavior that others did not (Emmit).

The socializing process aims for individuals to learn and reproduce the customs, values, traditions, meanings..., of the cultural and social group to which they belong and in which they develop. Socialization is therefore configured as “the learning process of a) social behaviors considered appropriate within the context where the developing individual is, together with b) the norms and values that govern these behavioral patterns” [20, p. 819]. This social learning is what allows individuals to perpetuate the traditions, habits, behaviors and culture in which they are immersed in endoculturation. The behaviors and social norms shown by Isabel and Emmit have allowed them to identify and compare their behaviors with that of other members of their culture and to configure a sense and identity of difference based on self-questioning and permanent self-doubt.

Endoculturation thus becomes a process that constrains the behavior of every individual in a cultural and social sense, and forces them to learn, reproduce and adopt the behaviors, norms and social and cultural values of their community. The reproduction and implementation of these socially “accepted” or “consensual” behaviors facilitates both the survival and the social and cultural identification of individuals with their group; on the contrary, the questioning or non-reproduction of these over-imposed social and cultural models [21], has generated discomfort, sanction and / or criticism on the part of the social group towards those attitudes or practices that they have valued as “maladaptive” and who have moved away from the values or behaviors of these groups.

Identity of the difference in the school environment -school experiences-

The diagnosis, from a school perspective, assumes a pejorative character, even more so when it is based on deficit –as most of school diagnostic–, and configures a school identity based on self-doubt [4], and on suggestion. The school diagnosis promotes a segregating discourse and is materialized in justified school groupings based on the behavior and the way students face an inflexible and homogenizing curriculum.

This situation encourages teachers to show academic and school ostracism towards part of their students, promoting the naturalization of segregating school practices as a means of serving students who are not capable of learning the ordinary curriculum.

At that time there were no reinforcement classes, so I felt displaced, which I did not like at all because they sent me a class with students with disabilities. I have never been high marks, but I did not like how they were dealing my difficulties. I didn't like being given different exams from the rest of my classmates, that frustrated me (Isabel).

I remember that, at school instead of playing with the other boys, I would stay in the yard walking or thinking. I repeated a year that was third grade because of the problems I had, I was not able to follow the explanations of the class, and also because the teacher was not too concerned about my problem in itself, they considered it convenient to take me out of class with students with disabilities (Emmit).

We find ourselves with a school that, based on educational criteria of a qualitative and quantitative "normalizing" nature, is based on a logic of deficit, and which personalizes in the students any "anomaly or difficulty" that occurs in the teaching-learning process. This personalistic, exclusive and differentiating attitude that has been configured based on Isabel and Emmit's school experience has generated a personal and social perception of difference –identity of the difference– with respect to their peers, as a result of which a identity and a personal and social image that has been forged based on this phenomenon described.

Identity of the difference in the school environment –social experiences–

School violence has become a common occurrence in our schools in recent years [22] and unfortunately, in Isabel and Emmit's school experience. Bullying is a common and widespread problem [23] which affects the entire educational environment, but mainly and directly acts on students, materializing in a "systematic abuse of power" [24], by a partner or a group [25].

It all started with a shirt that I liked, and I stopped wearing it because Yusra and four other girls started making fun of me when I was wearing that shirt. They made fun of my physical appearance or my academic results, they also said that I was a lesbian because they had misinterpreted something I said, they emptied my backpack in my face and my notes were read (Isabel).

The first time I was bullied was when I was nine years old in Don José's class. Pablo scared me with a plastic spider, at that time spiders scared me, and I cried. I also remember that they pinched me, and that hurt me a lot because of my hypersensitivity. Also, his friends and he used to corner me on my table without being able to escape, and that's when they hurt me. I remember that in elementary school I cried a lot because of everything they did to me. From time to time I did not want to go to school, thanks to some teachers the bullying stopped, Don José spoke with my classmates (Emmit).

As can be seen from the life stories of Isabel and Emmit, we witness actions directed towards two people whom the aggressors classify as "weak", that is, we find abusive behavior characterized by an imbalance of power, which is intentional and harmful, and that is repeated over time [26]. These experiences have caused Isabel and Emmit to develop behaviors related to phobia and dropping out of school, feelings of isolation, loneliness and low self-esteem, which increase the feeling of victimhood, helplessness and guilt, accentuating even more the construction of "identity of the difference".

IV. CONCLUSION

Isabel and Emmit have experienced social and school situations of fear, discrimination, school segregation and school bullying that have had a considerable impact on the construction of their social, school and personal identity. These segregating practices have only accentuated and shaped an identity of difference that has been built from discourses and social and educational actions.

As has been pointed out in another work [3], this identity of difference has been configured through a cognitive (thought), affective (feelings) and attitudinal (acts and behaviors) process, which has been developed linearly in three stages linked to each other.

(1) The self-reflection that both have made about their social and educational behaviors has configured an identity perception of "difference." Isabel and Emmitt have perceived that their interests, behaviors and social and relational development have not been or are not the same as those of their peers and family members, generating contradictions regarding their social identity.

(2) The reprimands and self-reflection that Isabel and Emmitt have made about their respective social and school experiences have generated an emotional situation characterized by guilt and self-doubt, influencing in a considerable way their self-esteem and emotional state and their capacity to establish social relationships.

(3) These aspects have promoted behaviors of "voluntary isolation" with the aim of avoiding comments and social and school situations that are difficult to manage emotionally.

In this sense, and as states Cortés, González and Sánchez [27], we advocate promoting inclusive and cooperative educational actions from the school that favor inclusive and meaningful school and educational practices that allow (1) to respond to diversity from a dimension curricular and social; (2) build a social and educational imaginary in which diversity, in its entire spectrum, is seen as an inherent aspect of the human being. In this sense, and as professionals in the educational field we have a lot of work to do, because as Arón and Milicic (1999) point out, "it will be the teachers who will strengthen or modify the image that children have formed of themselves, they will strengthen or weaken their basic, they will promote competitive or solidary styles, create protective environments or precipitate risk situations" (p.16).

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