

HOW MANY SUBJECTS SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH? THE CLAIMING SUBJECT AS A POSSIBILITY IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

QUANTOS SUJEITOS DEVEM PARTICIPAR DA PESQUISA? O SUJEITO REIVINDICATIVO COMO POSSIBILIDADE NA PESQUISA EM EDUCAÇÃO

¿CUÁNTOS SUJETOS DEBEN PARTICIPAR EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN? EL SUJETO RECLAMANTE COMO POSIBILIDAD EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN EDUCATIVA

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ABSTRACT: This text aims to present an important component of method for qualitative research in education: the claiming subject. When planning the structure of a research, researchers may have doubts about the definition of the appropriate number of participating subjects. The claiming subject in research in education makes a different move from what is traditionally done. Instead of the researcher asking, it is the subject who claims to participate in the research. It is pointed out that the researcher-subject and subject-researcher relationship needs further study and that researchers in education need to have as an assumption, the possibility of encountering other subjects in the field of research that can bring important contributions to their studies.

KEYWORDS: Claiming subject. Democracy research. Methodological research.

RESUMO: *Este texto tem como objetivo apresentar um importante componente a compor o método das pesquisas qualitativas em educação: o sujeito reivindicativo. Ao planejar a estrutura de uma pesquisa, os pesquisadores podem ter dúvidas quanto à definição do número adequado de sujeitos participantes. O sujeito reivindicativo na pesquisa em educação faz um movimento diferente do que tradicionalmente se faz. Ao invés do pesquisador solicitar, é o sujeito que reivindica a participação na pesquisa. É apontado que a relação pesquisador-sujeito e sujeito-pesquisador precisa de maiores aprofundamentos, e que os pesquisadores em educação precisam ter como pressuposto a possibilidade de se depararem com outros sujeitos no campo de pesquisa, que podem trazer importantes contribuições para seus estudos.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Sujeito reivindicativo. Pesquisa democrática. Metodologia de pesquisa.*

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RESUMEN: Este texto tiene como objetivo presentar un componente importante de un método para la investigación cualitativa en educación: el sujeto reclamante. Al planificar la estructura de una investigación, los investigadores pueden tener dudas sobre la definición del número apropiado de sujetos participantes. El sujeto reclamante en investigación en educación hace un movimiento diferente de lo que tradicionalmente se hace. En lugar de que el investigador pregunte, es el sujeto quien dice participar en la investigación. Se señala que la relación investigador-sujeto y sujeto-investigador necesita más estudio y que los investigadores en educación deben tener como un supuesto, la posibilidad de encontrar otros temas en el campo de la investigación que puedan aportar importantes contribuciones a sus estudios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: El sujeto reclamante. Investigación democrática. Metodología de investigación.

Introduction³

I show how some inspirations, which can come from anywhere and anytime, are important for the way we do our research. (PARAÍSO, 2012).

This article presents reflections and dialogues with the movement that has sought to create alternatives in the way of doing research; an example is the interactive, democratic and participatory methodologies in the production of research in education. Our objective, by sharing our reflections in this text, is to present an important component to compose the method of qualitative research in education: the claiming subject. This is because we identified that the researcher could include as research subjects other subjects who, in addition to claiming participation, demonstrate potential to contribute to the research objectives.

Inspired by the principles of democratic management of education, we proposed to investigate and discuss in the Masters in Education and Teaching (UFMG) the participation of the school community in the management of early childhood education⁴ and, in the first two semesters (2015), we focused on the elaboration of the project of research, in the process of its evaluation by the Ethics and Research Committee of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (COEP/UFMG)⁵ and, after obtaining authorization to carry out the field investigation,

³ A version of this text was presented at the II Congress on Innovation and Teaching Methodologies held in 2016 at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte/MG. For this version, revisions and small additions were made to the body of the text.

⁴ The entire master's course, including theoretical and empirical disciplines and research, was initiated and completed between 2015 and 2016.

⁵ The field research was approved and authorized by COEP/UFMG and registered under No. 49227515.0.0000.5149 on Plataforma Brasil. All participating subjects were in agreement and signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF).

we started and concluded the research, as provided for in the schedule and respecting the current Brazilian legislation that establishes, through Resolutions 196/96, 466/12 and 510/16, research with humans (BRASIL, 1996; 2012; 2016).

In our planning and throughout the research process, we tried to use methodological approaches that would allow us to have a democratic relationship with the subjects. However, making democratic choices in education research touches on issues considered fundamental when researching in the area of humanities and social sciences.

When we investigate human society, we are dealing with an object that is dynamic, not static, not free from modification, as what is human has the present marked by the past and thought for the future, what is human is historical (MINAYO, 1994).

Also, in research with human beings, ethical rigor and social commitment are essential to the researcher (FLICK, 2009), who should be concerned with respecting the research subject and providing feedback on the findings to people who proposed to participate in the study. The concern with ethical rigor in research involving children, such as ours, for example, should be even greater, as stated by Sônia Kramer (2002).

We believe that it would be unethical with the subjects and with our principles to use techniques and methods that were not democratic, since, after all, we intended to listen to subjects from the school community of certain early childhood education institutions in the city of Betim/MG.

In the dialectic between the democratic framework that guided the study and the uncertainties that leave us in a fragile situation when researching in the area of human and social sciences, the demanding subject of the research emerged. We are not starting from nothing, but just encouraging the discussion about a different possibility that we chose when defining the subjects of our research in education.

The methodological approach

As Minayo (1994) elucidates, we understand methodology as the path of thought and practice carried out along the way. The posture we have adopted when researching has followed two fundamental principles based on a theoretical-methodological plan influenced by authors from dialectical-Marxist currents, because, as Garcia tells us (2003, p. 35, our translation), it is necessary to face the field of research as a “[...] challenging moment that public intellectuals are called to participate in, committing themselves to the radicalization of

democracy, putting their research, writings and speeches at the service of an emancipatory project”.

The first of the principles is the methodological rigor necessary to carry out research. This includes the actions of planning, reflecting, preparing for unforeseen events, organizing the material, conquering and obtaining a structure of physical and financial resources.

The second principle concerns the flexibility needed to carry out investigations in the field of human sciences. Carlos Brandão and Maristela Borges (2007, p. 57, our translation) influence us because they are consistent in saying that any “[...] model of science closed in itself is a fundamentalist thought experience, like that of any religion or any other system in a fanatical sense”.

When dealing with people, children, families, professionals, managers, social movements and many others, we are aware that things cannot be so predictable, as we are conditioned to possible variations, changes, unforeseen events, and we do not seek certainty, but rather the dialogue.

The challenge we have launched ourselves – even for us – seems to be daring, but necessary from an intellectual point of view, as we are doing democratic research and we need democratic paths. The encounter in the theoretical-exploratory path with Uwe Flick (2009, p. 361, our translation) allowed us to choose triangulation as our methodology, as according to the author, this “[...] keyword is used to designate the combination of different methods, study groups, local and temporal environments and different theoretical perspectives to deal with a phenomenon”. Also, according to the author, “[...] triangulation can be applied as an approach to further substantiate the knowledge obtained through qualitative methods. Substantiation, here, does not mean evaluating the results, but systematically expanding and complementing the possibilities of knowledge production” (FLICK, p. 362, our translation).

We use some methods that are more traditional in research, such as interviews and discussion groups, but the perspective of the bricolage method (KINCHELOE; BERRY, 2007) has expanded our view in relation to methodological choices: due to the fact that it is a method dynamic, bricolage allows innovation in education research processes. Of course, we do not adopt this perspective as the structural foundation of our investigation, but when we admit the complexity of the object of our research, “[...] bricolage builds a much more active role for human beings, both when shaping reality as for creating the research processes and narratives that represent it” (KINCHELOE; BERRY, 2007, p. 16-17, our translation).

Thus, in data collection, we triangulate methods such as: discussion groups (WELLER, 2013); interviews (TEIXEIRA; PADUA, 2006); participant observation (FLICK,

2009); participatory research (BRANDÃO; BORGES, 2007); and bricolage (KINCHELOE; BERRY, 2007). The instruments used to record data and obtain information were: field notebooks, footage, audio recordings, photos, open questionnaires about the school, semi-structured questionnaires about the participants, drawings with the children, formal and informal conversations.

Research subject: an unfinished definition?

The question raised in this section is not about the meaning of what is subject. Of course, the concept of this word is not unanimous in the scientific community, but, in our view, the subject “[...] thus, becomes what is said about him” (PARAÍSO, 2012, p. 29, our translation). Before we talk about our doubt, it is important to consider the following context.

Until the conclusion of the research project, two subjects of the Master's Degree in Education and Teaching (UFMG) course were taken on research methodologies and one on research subjects. The first two contributed to the maturation of the chosen methods, to the survey of bibliographic references, and also made it possible to learn about other research and other methodological proposals by listening to classmates. The subject on subjects expanded the references and, mainly, contributed to the definition of the subjects participating in the study. Throughout this last discipline, our reflections revolved around the axis of three double questions: “Who is the subject? Why?”, “Where is he? Why?”, “How many are there? Why?”.

As our research had as its theme the participation of the school community in the management of early childhood education, therefore, we are talking about the community and about the management of education. So, answering the first question, “Who is the subject?”, in our case, it is the school community of three early childhood education institutions and some municipal managers.

And about “Where is he located?”, we chose the municipality of Betim/MG and initially selected three Municipal Children's Centers⁶-MCC. As for the managers, at first, we wanted to hear from people linked to the Municipal Education Secretariat of Betim, the Single Union of Workers in Education Sub-headquarters Betim, the Municipal Education Council of the city and also the directors of the three MCC.

To answer the third question, “How many are there?”, it was necessary to mature the concept of school community. From a broader perspective, it is composed of students

⁶ This is the nomenclature used in the city of Betim-MG to identify early childhood education institutions that belong to the municipal public basic education network.

(children in kindergarten), parents, professionals, civil society leaders, and people who are directly and indirectly involved in the school environment (LOMBARDI, 2013; SILVA, 2015; TEIXEIRA, 2010). We defined that a total of twelve subjects would be chosen in each school community, three from each segment: children, parents, professionals and civil society. And, as managers, we would choose one from each institution.

Obviously, we cannot carry out a field investigation without defining the subjects, as, as mentioned above, the subject is “what is said about it”. But our doubt during the elaboration, and which persisted until the moment we finished the research project, was in relation to the number of subjects selected for the investigation. Was it adequate? Was it really a representative sample? Would it provide us with important results for the investigated theme? Could it be that there were too many and that would make our work difficult? Would this be an adequate number of subjects when we propose to know the social reality of school communities?

Anyway, we were not clear if it would really be the right amount. We realized that, after completing the field research, it would not even be possible to know an exact number of subjects, but it would only be possible to arrive at an approximate forecast with the help of references (theoretical knowledge) and, mainly, with the help of experience with the subject (empirical knowledge).

What we are doing is qualitative research, dealing with uncertainties, dealing with doubt, in other words, as Meyer and Paraíso (2012, p. 18) say, “[...] we know that there are many methodological doubts of those who venture to investigate without having a safe path to follow during this research process”. What we tried to do, when considering the number of forty-two subjects, was to make as clear as possible the reasons and why we projected such a quantity.

And in fact, entering the field of investigation required us to modify some strategies. One of the three Municipal Children's Centers showed no interest in receiving us, we tried, we insisted, which cost us time, but we were unable to enter the institution. In this case, we chose to emphasize research at the other two institutions.

The number of managers was increased, as, throughout the interviews and discussion groups, we felt the need to listen to other important actors on the subject. As we brought contributions from participant research to our methodology (BRANDÃO; BORGES, 2007), the subjects themselves pointed out to us other people to listen to. We finished the field research with a total of 39 subjects involved, but what caught our attention the most, and what

drove us to broaden and deepen this discussion, was what we call here the claiming subject, as will be explained in the following topic.

The claiming subject

Choosing a theme related to democracy, democratic education, democratic management, popular and social participation does not necessarily imply democratic methodological paths and this generates the following questions: research that proposes to collaborate with the "radicalization of democracy"⁷ and with does an emancipatory social project necessarily require democratic methodological paths? Is it possible to be democratic at all times? Of course, this needs to be further elaborated.

A basic concept of democracy is that democracy is “[...] characterized by a set of rules (primary or fundamental) that establish *who* is authorized to take collective decisions and with what *procedures*” (BOBBIO, 1986, p. 18, our translation). In a democratic regime, it cannot be said that all people participate, because even in the most perfect democracy, everyone's opinion is not listened to, but what is considered is the majority, the approximation of the whole. For the decision that is taken by a citizen, several citizens or many to be appreciated as a collective, it needs to be supported by some rules, and the decision of what will be considered needs to be something real, where people are actually able to make a decision (BOBBIO, 1986). In studies that seek to advance in relation to the perspective proposed by Bobbio (1986) it is important to consider the reflections of Costa and Prado (2017) who want to guarantee effective democracy for subordinate and excluded social groups.

The relationship between our research and democracy consists in the articulation we made to provide conditions for people to participate in the study, such as listening to these subjects, the sensitive posture to accept suggestions that emerged in the researcher-subject relationship, and adoption of an open posture to learn from new experiences.

In defining who the research subjects would be, we sought to let the communities and institutions themselves choose the participants. Of course, sometimes we had to decide, because research involves time, resources, accessibility, authorization and, in qualitative research in the Humanities and Social Sciences, there is also unpredictability. We have always been looking for an extended path and not a narrow or one-sided path.

⁷ Here we use the expression radicalization of democracy to designate works that bring as an object of study or as a challenge the construction of a fairer society, with more equality and recognition of social differences. Radicalizing democracy in research is always to keep alive the democratic posture of both the researcher and his analysis, and also the methodological strategies adopted. On this issue, see Costa and Prado (2017)

There were many situations, experiences, but, specifically, our look in this text is focused on one of the school communities in which we work, this being the community of the Recanto da Criança Municipal Children's Center, located in the Petrópolis neighborhood, in Betim.

After the initial conversations seeking authorization to enter the school environment, we carried out six visits to the institution in total. The visits took place between the 3rd, 9th, 16th, 23rd, 25th and 26th of November 2015. During the month of October we had already talked to one of the managers and, as the institution was undergoing changes in direction, on the 03 of November it was necessary to establish another dialogue with the new principal.

On this occasion and after the manager's consent, we asked her to help us invite people from the community to participate in a research presentation meeting. The director found the best day and time for us to return to the MCC and invited some people who were available among employees, family members and community leaders to participate in the meeting on the scheduled date. The condition for the participation of children in our study primarily implied acceptance by the person responsible, as indicated in the National Health Council resolution 466 of 12 December 2012, in item III, related to the ethical aspects of research involving humans:

g) obtain free and informed consent from the research participant and/or their legal representative, including in cases of research that, by its nature, justifiably implies *a posteriori* consent (BRASIL, 2012, p. 4, our translation).

Field activities were advanced with the holding of discussion groups, data collection through observation, records in the field notebook and photographic records. We were free to move around the institution, we participated in the routine at times, we helped when necessary, but somehow, for some people, we were still strangers, and in the relationship with others, the estrangement was already being reduced. This is a challenge where “[...] the researcher faces the issue of negotiating proximity and distance in relation to the person(s) studied” (FLICK, 2009, p. 115, our translation).

The writing in the field notebook on 25 of November made the following entry:

My relationship with the group was already being better accepted in view of the other visits. I could see that the gazes turned towards me were no longer so constant. For both adults and children. Many people were already approaching me, others still seemed not to be afraid, but gradually the bond was established and my presence was being welcomed, so that it was no longer such an early novelty. I was constantly invited by my colleagues to have a snack, lunch, a cup of coffee (Notes from the field notebook, day 25 November 2015, our translation).

Our actions, in part, followed some guidelines developed for data collection, however, we also tried to remain sensitive and flexible to what was happening in the environment. The interaction was constant with the children and adults, but the little ones were more uninhibited, they asked, questioned our presence, they wanted to know why we researchers used cameras, recorders and notebooks. In a way, they were demanding to participate in the research, but they still did not know how to do it. We could consider these attitudes as characteristics of the claiming subject, but we had a focus and doing research requires planning; this includes the prior authorization of the subjects and/or guardians. Also, if we recorded everything, we could get lost in the data analysis step.

On the fourth and fifth visit to the MCC, we were already more “familiar” with the environment and with the people, and it was during these days that interactions with some people from that institution took place. The interactions that took place were not planned and it was not with the subjects that the direction had helped to indicate as possible study participants.

At different times, the claiming subjects emerged in our research in the presence of a cook, a child and a teacher. After finding out why we were present at the MCC Recanto da Criança, they came to us and began to say what they thought about the institution and about children's education. They did not ask for permission, in fact "entered the research". Our eyes in those days were focused on other subjects, we had already carried out some records and survey of their personal data, but given what happened, and considering that we are carrying out qualitative and democratic research, we tried to maintain a flexible posture. We believe that it was necessary to include these people as subjects of our research.

In fact, these subjects claimed their place, their voice, their presence in our study. In other words, they got right to the point – “look, this is what you want to know and this is what we think”. This reminds us of Brandão and Borges when they said that:

[...] the traditional subject-object relationship between researcher-educator and popular groups must be progressively converted into a subject-subject relationship, based on the assumption that all people and all cultures are original sources to know. [...] Scientific and popular knowledge are critically articulated in a third new and transforming knowledge (BRANDÃO; BORGES, 2007, p. 54, our translation).

The first event occurred with one of the school's cooks. At the moment, we did not know how to deal with the situation: on 23 November 2015 she approached and wanted to know information about what we were researching. On the day of the discussion group (16th of November) with all the subjects in the community, she even went to the room, entered,

listened to our conversation and then left. But it was after that day (on the 23th of November) that we noticed her interest in contributing to the research.

She came to meet me and asked me: “This research you are doing, what is it about?”. Through her speech, she was demonstrating that she wanted to know more and also participate in the research. It was not clear to her why some people were chosen and others were not. I explained to her that I asked the direction and coordination to help me choose people, as it was impossible to get everyone to participate. She agreed with what I said but was adding and saying about her experience at school. For ethical reasons I chose not to do the recording. She said that for over eighteen years she has lived and worked there, she knows every part of the school and that if there is anything to do from cooking to directing, she does it. According to her, the school used to be better, before the relationship was not just professional, people were more united and there were fewer differences (Field notebook notes, day 23 November 2015).

On the next visit, after having reflected on the event, as soon as we arrived at the institution, we spoke with the cook and invited her to give us an interview. Thus, we presented the Informed Consent Form and communicated that the conversation would be recorded.

In the second situation, as we had already gone through this experience with the cook, if other people had similar attitudes, we would already know how to act in the situation. And on the morning of 25 November, during recess time, a child from the 5 year old class asked us about what we were doing there at the MCC and then began to talk a little about her own experience.

She asked about my notebook and what it was for. I said that I was doing research and that I wanted to get to know the school. She talked a little bit about her perception of the school. She told me that her teacher is very strong and that during rehearsal she had to kiss a classmate's cheek because it was part of the choreography. I asked her what she thought of school. She said it is cool, but “there is the big boys” (first year students). I asked if she was listened to and she said yes, adding that, before, when the other principal was at school, she would go to the secretary's office to talk to her about her mother and father (Notes from the field notebook, 25 November 2015). This child also spoke of her experience with research in the children's world:

I have a survey at home and it's about butterflies. I take a pot, take the butterflies and place them on the board to see. I look at butterfly research because I have a lot of butterfly books. My sisters have the cake recipes, so they give me some papers to write down about butterflies (Child participating in the research, 2015, our translation).

One of this child's classmates was part of our discussion group with the school community, so she and other children in the class constantly sought us out to find out more about the research and the classmate's participation. It was not only her who showed interest in being part of the study, however, we found it somewhat impractical and outside the conditions that we had to include all of them in the research. The great difficulty from our point of view, but extremely necessary from an ethical point of view, is firstly obtaining authorization from those responsible for the children so that they can collaborate with the investigation. But, within our limitations, we tried to include the little ones, asking those responsible for the child mentioned above, the one who approached first, demanding to participate in our research activities. We had parental consent and the child participated in a discussion group with other children and also gave us interviews.

The third case occurred when we were taking photographic records of the institution's spaces and, when we greeted the teacher of the class of 3 year old children, we started talking to her. We introduced ourselves to her and talked a little about our work, she also introduced herself to us and then wanted to know more about the research. As we explained some of the work, she promptly began to talk about her experience, as noted in the note below.

She asked what we were doing there, after we explained, she said she thought we were photographing the school for some renovation and thought we were linked to the city's construction sector, as she said we were looking a lot at the walls and the roof. Afterwards she started to talk a little about her experience as a teacher, she said that she had graduated in management processes and before coming to education, she worked for a long time in another area. After she acquired a certain condition in her life, she decided to do what she liked and that's when she studied pedagogy and came to work in early childhood education in Betim. She started talking about the school, about the children, about teacher formation. It was necessary to interrupt her and we made an invitation to interview her (Field notebook notes, day 25 November 2015).

The conversation with this teacher revealed to us that not all people who belonged to the school environment knew the reason that led us to that place: she had already noticed our presence for a few days, but she was not sure what we were looking for in the MCC. When the teacher started sharing information aimed at our research, we quickly invited her to give us an interview, as we wanted her to formally authorize us to make recordings of the conversations.

Final considerations

The Claiming Subject in education research makes a different movement from what is traditionally done. Instead of asking subjects to participate, it is the subject who claims the participation. In our case, we had already determined the group of subjects at the Recanto da Criança Municipal Children's Center, but we included other people as they became aware of, or rather, sought to know the research objectives and expressed their desire to be part of the study.

The democratic researcher has goals and intentionality is evident. There is no scientific neutrality, however, the field to be investigated has the research subjects and several other subjects that make up the group and participate in the studied institution. Therefore, as other subjects show interest in participating and contributing, as researchers, we cannot exempt ourselves from listening to them.

Democratic research brings as one of its pillars the commitment to contribute to the construction of a fairer and more egalitarian reality. Obviously, being democratic at all times is not an easy task. In this research, not all people who expressed interest were able to participate and be heard. Therefore, it is important to prepare and be aware of this possibility. However, it was when we went into the field that we identified this alternative for the act of researching, which can and should accommodate the demands of claiming subjects.

Researchers need to assume the possibility of coming across other subjects in the research field who can contribute to the studies. Our choice to combine different methods and techniques in data collection and the planning strategies and flexibilities that we traced were important for the maturation of the need for qualitative research to be more horizontal, democratic and built-in dialogue with the most diverse subjects of the field researched.

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