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**EDUCATIONAL BIOGRAPHY AS A MEANS OF CRITICAL
REFLECTION**

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Abstract

The main target of this paper is to present educational biography and its potential to become a critical reflection tool for the development of adult educators. Educational biography is understood as an oral or written testimony of a person in relation to the sum of his/her learning experiences, either within or outside the education system. Individual educational biographies expressively expose the way that people interact with their educational environment and construct their professional identities, as well as their thinking manners. On the other hand, critical self-reflection is a term that has many interpretations and definitions. However, it remains the main cognitive process that may lead to individual and social transformation. In this paper, beyond a clear presentation of the concept of critical reflection, its content and its function towards the transformation of a person's frame of reference, I present the structure of an educational biography workshop that has been successfully implemented with adult educators and other teachers in Greece.

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1. Introduction

Critical thinking and critical reflection are learning outcomes that have been in the agenda of adult education for many decades. Both these concepts have been part of the more well known philosophical and practical approaches of our field of practice. On the one hand, Paulo Freire's complex process of conscientization has as a prerequisite the development of the critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection (Freire, 1996, 1998). For Freire and his devotees, the exploitation of the intrinsic but lethargic critical reflection skills of the adult learners is the cornerstone for the next step, that of political

action. Critical reflection and political action constitute praxis which is the ultimate outcome for any adult educational activity within the Freireian philosophy.

On the other hand, Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, which advocates for an education that could lead to the transformation of one's frame of reference, is directly depended to a process of critical reflection through rational dialogical means (Mezirow, 1990). The Mezirowian perspective of adult education is grounded on a process of deep and extensive examination of a person's dysfunctional assumptions in order to ameliorate the discrepancy between a person's biography and the current comprehension of social reality (Mezirow, 1991).

Therefore, in the framework of any of the above educational philosophies, adult educators are more or less expected to facilitate within their sessions the development of the participants' critical skills. Indeed, for many developmental psychologists like Robert Kegan the adult phase of human life is distinguished from the previous life stages (i.e. childhood, adolescence) due to the tacit competencies of critical reflection which may well be further developed. Kegan seems to be very convinced about this relation and he makes an explicit suggestion about it in his proposed association between "curricular forms and appropriate audiences" (1994, p. 291).

At this point however, questions rise: is it possible for an educator to foster a process of critical reflection if in the past she/he has not engaged herself/himself in the same process? How is it possible to facilitate an "unknown" process? The aforementioned questions are of a rhetorical nature. It is well known that it is not possible for any educator even a gifted one to facilitate something when there is no personal-direct experience about its content, context and process. Thus, the real question is in what ways we can involve an adult educator in a critical reflection process? What kind of assumptions or which part of an educator's frame of reference may we examine to assist her professional development? Are there any examples of such processes and how are they structured?

In this paper, I will try to address these questions drawing examples from my own practice. To achieve this aim I will start by presenting my conception about critical reflection, its content and its function towards the transformation of a person's frame of reference. Then I will present educational biography and I will focus on its potential to become a critical reflection "tool". Finally, I will present the structure of a workshop that has been successfully implemented with adult educators and other teachers in Greece.

2. Critical Reflection and Transformation

The learning value of critical thinking is discussed by several authors from both the fields of pedagogy and that of adult education. Nevertheless, this very important mental process is frequently interpreted in many different ways and is often confused or identified with other cognitive processes such as analytical thinking (analysis of the components of a problem or a case) or logical thought, which is factually the formulation of a conclusion after a series of logical arguments.

In my view, which is influenced by the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire (1974) for critical awareness as well as from the practical and theoretical approach of Brookfield for radical teaching (Brookfield & Holst, 2011), critical thinking is a process that aims to lead a learner in a careful, insightful and in-depth examination of the assumptions on which rests her or his perception of reality.

Critical thinking is all about the thorough enquiry of the foundations of this perception. This process is not without a structure. It is not a chaotic quest for deep-rooted assumptions. Although there is no proposed order, Brookfield (1988) suggests that a mental exercise may be characterised as a critical thinking process when it includes four fundamental activities: (a) assumption analysis – this activity includes the challenging of a person’s values and cultural practices in order to analyze their impact on everyday life, (b) contextual awareness which involves the realization that our individual and collective beliefs are created in a particular historical and cultural context which should be recognized, (c) imaginative speculation or the search for alternative ways of thinking about various social phenomena in order to challenge the dominant ways of thinking and acting and (d) reflective scepticism, which includes challenging the claims and generalizations of all those grand narratives that lead to uncritical interaction patterns

This process of critical thinking is leading to challenging the validity of the prior assumptions of a person’s frame of reference or in other words of the conceptual toolbox that a person uses to interpret the world and her/his relations with the self and the others. This process is actually the core of the process of transformative learning which was introduced by Jack Mezirow (1991) and is one of the most influential theories of learning in the field of adult education.

3. Educational Biography

Educational biography as a critical reflection process is based on the assumption that seeking understanding of our life course could enhance learning and could potentially be a transformative force on both individual and social levels. Educational biography as a research method is considered part of the biographical and life-history research approaches that flourish within the qualitative research paradigm (Alheit et al., 2007). Indeed, biographical research endeavours may be found nowadays in many journals with a variety of terms such as i.e. auto/biography, personal narrative, biographic narrative etc. Biographical research may take the form of investigation into the lives of others, or of reflection on one’s own experience, history or identity, or a mixture of both (Merrill & West, 2009).

Plummer (2000) indicates that educational biographies are thematic documents of life where the information is organized around the life stages or other categories of an individual’s learning experiences and highlight the frame of reference of the learning process through which individuals construct their lives, acquire their skills and develop their understanding about learning and teaching. It is more than apparent that such a process maybe of extreme value when the individual whose educational biography is analysed is a teacher. Several studies have indicated that the biographical elements that constitute the frame of reference of educators and especially those that refer to the past learning experiences, shape their “teaching identity” (i.a. Larsen, 1999; Koulaouzides & Palios, 2009).

The idea of examining the educational biographies of learners and more specific of educators in a form of a structured and organized process was introduced by Dominicé (2000) who recognized the educational biography as a critical self-reflection process:

Educational biographies can help adult learners recognize social and interpersonal influences on their lives and educational activities. Preparing a life history focused on learning can also clarify the interdependence of biographical themes, major life transitions and educational activities calling learners’ attention to both processes and outcomes in their lives and learning....

These narratives can also reveal formerly hidden influences such as cultural traditions and beliefs.

(Dominice, 2000, p.6)

In the aforementioned quoted paragraph we may clearly identify the first elements of critical reflection as defined previously by Brookfield that of assumption analysis and contextual awareness. Based on the above thinking, Dominice, organized for many years an Educational Biography Seminar at the University of Geneva that was addressed to adult learners who wished to be involved in adult education as professionals. He developed a workshop where learners after being exposed to the theoretical foundations of biographical research, they were expected to prepare written narratives. Then, through a year-long group-work process a through analysis and discussion of every narrative took place. This process that satisfied the third and fourth element of the abovementioned critical reflection process, gave to the participants the opportunity to recognize alternative understandings and qualities but also to realize that their competencies regarding learning and eventually teaching are socially constructed:

As professionals make explicit the assumptions, influences plans, activities and results of their past learning, they can become more reflective practitioners and acquire better guides to their future learning.

(Dominice, 2000, p. 57)

It is clear to me that the recognition and examination of an educational biography that has as a consequent result the illumination of the individual learning paths is an internal dialogical process, a process of critical self-reflection. The construction of an educational biography by an educator and its shared analysis and interpretation urges her/him to stand firmly against old and new doctrines and to question the structural assumptions that constitute her/his individual frame of reference and thus shape her/his professional identity - i.e. teaching style, relation to the learners and other qualities that form the profession of an educator - (Koulaouzides, 2010).

4. Description of an Educational Biography Workshop

As I presented above, Pierre Dominicé showed us the way by offering us a clear theoretical and practical field of practice. However, his brilliant seminar had as a timeframe a whole academic year. Our experience has showed us that in continuing professional education courses, adult educators rarely have the luxury to devote a whole academic year for similar activities. Therefore, having all of the above in mind, together with a colleague who has also been involved in biographical research (see Pazoni & Koulaouzides, 2016), we decided to implement a shorter self-reflection workshop through the use of educational biography aiming to (a) familiarize the participants with the biographical research approaches and (b) introduce a self-reflection methodology that may assist them in recognizing a particular part of their frame of reference: their assumptions about the role of the adult educator.

We argue that although this workshop is rather short (usually it requires two long weekends) the overall experience may become the stimuli for the initiation of an internal dialogical process that may lead individuals and more particular individuals in the educational profession to develop into reflective practitioners. Our argument is not only supported by the relevant literature (i.a. Dominice, 2007) but also and perhaps more importantly by the feedback comments we have received after having implemented this

workshop several times. It is noticeable that the participants in all their comments show an increased awareness regarding the relation between their biographical paradigm and their assumptions about the role of the teacher. The structure of the workshop is as follows:

We divide the group of the participants in smaller groups and we implement a short acquaintance exercise using a series of especially prepared cards. The cards have on them quotes that refer to the theory and practice of adult education from various known scholars. The cards are prepared in duplicates to give the participants the opportunity to create randomly formed couples. We then ask every couple to proceed with short interviews of each other and to discuss the quote found on their common card. As a next step we ask every participant to introduce to the rest of the group his/her couple and then to share with the group thoughts regarding the quote. In this part our aim is on the one hand to create a familiar environment and on the other hand to offer a first indication about the content of the session (biographical information – theory and practice of adult education). At the same time implicitly the whole group acquires a first idea of the existing assumptions about adult education during the commentaries of the participants on the printed quotes.

Then, we distribute to each participant two pages that contain two different exercises. The pages are colored differently and each group has its own color. We ask the participants to start with the first page where we ask them to think and write a short educational biographical account explaining to them that they should include as many educational experiences as they can, from any level of education. Once this is over, we ask the participants to take a break and then perform the second exercise which is asking them to write as explicitly as possible their opinion regarding the role of the adult educator based on their own experiences. We ask them then to attach the two pages together and to place both pages in a folder.

As a next step we collect the folders from each group and we distribute them so that each group receives the collected forms from a different group. We then invite the groups to open the folders and place the documents upside down. Then we ask each member of the group to pick randomly one set, to read the first the biographical account carefully and then to read the accompanied statement about the role of the adult educator and discuss it. The discussion is at the beginning an individual exercise and then a collective activity within each group. We urge the participants to comment the relation, if any, between the educational experiences described and the stated assumptions about the role of the adult educator. We also encourage them to discuss as thorough as possible all the cases in their folder and to decide about the presentation of each case to the rest of the group.

When all the groups are ready, we start the presentation of each account and the related statement about the role of the educator and the associated comments that took place from the discussion within the group. At this point, we ask the participants not to react when they hear their own biography but to keep notes and wait for the completion of the presentations. Once all the presentations are over we ask the participants to share on a voluntary basis with the rest of the group their reactions (agreements, disagreements, emotions and so on) and to comment about the content of the whole process.

After the implementation of this phase we present for a short period some theoretical elements about educational biography and its potential use a tool for the initiation of an internal dialogue, as means for critical self-reflection. Finally, we distribute a blank page to the participants asking them to illustrate the whole experience with a paragraph, a phrase, an image or anything they find appropriate. We urge to participants to post their appraisals on a board. This last activity concludes the workshop.

5. Conclusions

In this paper I demonstrated the potential use of educational biography as a tool for critical self reflection. I strongly support the idea that educational biography may foster and facilitate the dialogue of a person with himself/herself and the others. For those who are in the professional field of education, educational biography may found to be of extreme importance since the educational biography of a teacher, not only includes issues of educational and professional experiences but also encompasses aspects of family life, school life, personal characteristics, values, worldviews, and special features that are essential influences to career choices, i.e. to the teaching profession (Koulaouzides, 2010).

Through the presented workshop we try to foster critical self reflection since we consider educational biography as a powerful tool that is able to make people aware of their meaning-making process. Human beings have a rich and highly varied mental and social life reflected in all their relationships and institutions in which they live. Thus, recognizing and understanding the 'biographical experience' (on which meaning-making is based) is of key importance in educational theorizing, practice and research. The educational biography seen as a particular set of experiences of the self is a source of knowledge and a valuable pedagogic resource which can be utilized for learning as well as personal and professional development of educators.

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