# The role of education in narrative identity construction of young people: Focusing on young adoptees

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**Abstract:** During the period of adolescence, the need arises for the individual construct an identity enabler of a productive interplay with the surrounding world. The process of identity construction embeds the development of a sense of unity and purpose that mediates the equilibrium between the society demands for the individual to fit and the individual's psychological well-being. Throughout this process, the formal school education plays a critical role. The current study examines the role school education held in three adopted youths' construction of narrative identity and search for psychological well-being. Life narratives have been utilized in three case studies with young adopted. The narratives were analysed in reference to the Narrative Matrix Analysis System. All three narratives emphasized the school education period as the chronological benchmark that organized and influenced their identity construction and search for support towards belonging and adapting to the society demands.
**Keywords**: Adolescent health, adoption, health promotion.

## O papel da educação na construção da identidade narrativa em jovens adultos: focando em jovens adotados

**Resumo:** A adolescência é o momento em que surge a necessidade de construção de uma identidade que permita à pessoa uma relação produtiva com o mundo. O processo de construção da identidade está relacionado ao desenvolvimento de um sentido de unidade e de propósito diante das demandas da sociedade e ao sentimento de bem-estar. Neste sentido, a educação formal ocupa um lugar de destaque. O presente estudo examina o papel da educação escolar na construção da identidade narrativa em três jovens adultos com história de adoção. Foram utilizadas narrativas de vida em três estudos de caso com os jovens adotados. As narrativas foram submetidas a uma análise baseada no Sistema de Análise da Matriz Narrativa. As três narrativas enfatizam o papel da escola como referência cronológica, que organiza e influencia a construção das identidades, bem como a busca de pertença a um grupo e adequação às demandas sociais.
**Palavras-chave:** Saúde do adolescente, adoção, promoção da saúde.

## Introduction

Previous investigation stressing the critical role that school experiences detain on the construction of narrative identity in young adoptee (Vieira & Henriques, 2013a) is at the basis of the current research work. The present study aims at extending comprehension on this thematic through a focus on the relationship of young adoptees with the school context. This study lies on a comprehensive paradigm with the intent of adding to the discussion about the role of the school in the development of adolescents and young adults, in particular the adoptees.

*The construction of narrative identity in adolescence*

During the adolescence period the individuals are urged to construct an identity that allows them a productive relationship with the world (Erikson, 1968; McAdams, 2001; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). It is also the time when people gather sociocognitive conditions for the construction of coherent autobiographical narratives (Fivush & Buckner, 1998; Fivush & Haden, 2003; Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005; Fivush, 2008; McAdams, 1985; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). McAdams refers to the process of identity construction as the development of a sense of unity and purpose in face of the demands of the world and society. It is a process in which young people reorganize and reconstruct their life story in order to produce an autobiographical narrative. The construction of a narrative identity involves the making of consistent stories with the purpose of creating and communicating a sense of identity and meaning (Reese, Yan, Jack, & Hayne, 2010). By adolescence, people in our modern society begin a process of reviewing the past, understanding the present and planning the future from the creation of narratives about themselves, which have a function to build a minimum of unity and purpose in their own lives and with the world. Life stories are co-constructed with people with whom they live, as well as in reference to the embedding sociocultural context. These situated stories, to use the term coined by McLean, Pasupathi and Pals (2007), not only shape, but also maintain the identity of its author. These narratives build an integrative configuration of the self in the adult world. They have the ability to integrate different diachronically life situations experienced over years in stories full of meaning. They also have the ability to organize the beliefs and attitudes towards life in terms of a process of change and transformation: previously I thought and acted in such a way, but now I think and act differently. Life stories have also a function of synchronous integration, organizing the different roles, forms of relationship and the associated feelings and thoughts in a way that they can be seen and understood as a part of the same configuration of the self (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

*Narrative identity, adoption and well-being*

The organization of a narrative identity through a coherent life story is related to the construction of a balanced personality, able to deal with negative events in a constructive way and therefore with a high level of coping skills, resilience and well-being (McAdams & McLean, 2013). In an investigation of the narrative construction of the self in young people with a history of neglect followed by adoption, Fitzhardinge (2008) found the organization of coherent narratives as a key element in building a resilient self. Youth adopted people tended to construct life narratives focused on the theme of attachment and interpersonal relationships. The presence of coherent narratives seems to indicate that they were managing to cope with the traumatic and disruptive elements in abandonment situation through a resignification of adverse experiences. The narratives of the resilient group had three common characteristics: the skill of reflection on oneself and others, the feeling that they could be active in relation to the circumstances and be able to influence their own future, and the acknowledgment of the importance of interpersonal relationships. Fitzhardinge concludes that the construction

of life narratives is the foundation of the sense of self. What made the difference in building a resilient self was the way young people have provided renew meaning to the adverse events. The association between the construction of coherent life stories and coping is also shown in the study of Habermas e Bluk (2000). Studies such as Baerger and McAdams (1999) and Adler, Skalina and McAdams (2008) showed there is an association between well-being and production of coherent life stories, especially in stories where the protagonist has an active role in resolving the difficulties and problems. According to McAdams (2006), life stories that describe a life trajectory from a situation of social, emotional or relational instability to a situation where the difficulties are overcome (which he called 'redemptive stories') are associated with high levels of well-being. The life stories where narrators find redemptive meanings in suffering and adversity and that feature the theme of personal agency tend to enjoy higher levels of mental health, well-being and maturity (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

*School and identity*

There is some consensus in literature around the critical role that the adolescents' school experiences (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006; Fereira, Farias, & Silvares, 2009), the nature of the school environment (Gonçalves, 2012), and the relationships involving teachers and peers (Gonçalves, 2008) exert in the youngsters' self-image and identity construction. This relates in particular with the perspective of identity construction expressed by the interrelationship between the individual and the surrounding others through socio-cultural and linguistic practices (Lopes de Oliveira, 2006). In the adolescents' everyday lives a considerable amount of time is spent at school grounds. Consequently the school 'meddles' into their external environment in the sense that friendships built therein spread beyond the academic context. Thus, depending on the complexity of the relationships established at school, either individually and pedagogically, it can potentially represent either a source of satisfaction as stress for the youngsters (Ravens-Sieberer, Freeman, Kokonyei, Thomas & Erhart, 2009).

In the course of social interactions the adolescents devise an image of their self through the feedback on their behaviours and thoughts provided by peers. In turn, this feedback either confirms or prompts a change in their perception of self. Based on the nature of the feedback collected they may need to re-shape their identity in order to fit in and be approved in the particular socio-cultural context where they are situated (Sugimura & Shimizu, 2011). Gonçalves (2008) drawing over Honneth (2003), suggest that striving for recognition from peers is a key-element in the identity construction of adolescents. Throughout the process of identity construction people internalize standard schemata of social recognition through which they learn to identify themselves as members of a particular social group. However, the lack of social recognition or sense of not belonging to a particular social group can potentially inflict frustration, shame and humiliation to individuals with adverse effects on their identity construction. In this sense, establishing an interconnection, particularly with peers, is much about the search for belonging through the interplay with community members, by building references and values, replicating behaviour standards and reaching for relational power equilibrium (Sarmento, 2002).

The teachers themselves, along with the underlying pedagogical relationships with students evolving during academic interplay also play an important role in the construction of adolescent identities. In fact, both the relationships of adolescents with their peers as with their teachers are integral in the complexity of the school climate. The school climate comprises also of the school characteristics and the plethora of relationships occurring between teachers, students, administrators and parents. Because the nature of these interactions dictates the positioning of subjects in relation to the school itself, it has been argued that school climate holds critical influence on the identity construction of young students (Adeogun & Olisaemeka, 2011). For example, some theoretical and empirical postulates argue that students who take their teachers as role models do better in academic demands, show higher levels of self-esteem, are more resilient to adversity and thus, show higher confidence toward upcoming challenges (Rich & Schachter, 2012). Ultimately, it has been advocated that the school setting represents a key cultural societal institution to which students have to commit to during the process of co-construction of narrative identity in adolescence (Vasconcelos & Valsiner, 1995).

Nevertheless, regardless of the recognized key role that school experiences and the nature of the relational interactions during the adolescents' academic lifespan hold in their identity construction there is a glaring lack of studies examining this phenomenon. Indeed, the few existing studies were either shown to be somewhat inconclusive or revolved around issues concerned with gender, multiculturalism and integration of minority groups (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006). Despite the particular relevance of the life stories of adoptees, often impregnated by traumatic experiences and marked by adversity (Fitzhardinge, 2008), surprisingly the research in this area is particularly scarce, especially with regard to the narrative construction of identity in young adopted adults.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the development of life stories by young adopted adults through a narrative construction of identity with reference to the schooling context. The study's main interest concerns the role that school holds in the construction of narrative identity in young adults, focusing on adoptees.

**Methodology**

The life stories were taken from the database of the Research Group Webs of Meaning from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto. The database was built from previous studies, already published (Vieira, 2012; Vieira & Henriques, 2013a).The participants were three young girls between 20 and 22 years old with a history of adoption in childhood.

The first step taken in this research was to contact and invite a group of families to participate in the research project. During step two the project was presented to the families. The participants were invited to attend to an individual interview only after well clarified over the study's goals. It was applied the interview protocol of elicitation of Life Narrative. All interviews were recorded for later transcription.

After transcription, life stories have been divided into narrative sequences, according to the model of Adam (1985; 2008). The life narratives were submitted to a descriptive analysis of structure, process and content based in the code system of Gonçalves,

Henriques and Cardoso (2006a); Gonçalves, Henriques, Alves and Rocha (2006b) and Gonçalves, Henriques, Soares and Monteiro (2006c) and Gonçalves, Henriques, Alves and Soares (2002). In each narrative sequence was identified and described the organizing theme of the sequence, the characters, the scenarios, the action itself, the evaluation, and finally the elements of narrative process. The next step was the identification of logical and chronological organization of narrative and of the episodes set throughout the history. After this first organization the life narrative was described in a case study.

From the life stories were prepared three case studies, in a multiple case studies design (Yin, 2001). The names given to each case study are fictitious in order to protect the privacy of research subjects.

## Findings

*Beatrice*

The life narrative of Beatrice is organized chronologically and divided into two major thematic blocks that evolve in close interdependence. The first one portrays the pathway from life with the biological parents to life after being integrated in the new family. The second thematic concerns Beatrice's school path. Here, her life story develops from abandonment and subsequent adoption to the quest for love and caring which was ultimately encountered through integration with the new family, school, and friends.

Beatrice is 22-years old. She was adopted when she was nine and quite aware on the details of her route from the biological parents' house, passing through the host institution until meeting adoption. She recalled leaving with the biological parents, affected by alcoholism, to the age of eight. The altercations among her parents were very vivid in her mind as the neglect over her and her six siblings. In the children's age range she was at the middle. The precariousness of the family condition increased after the birth of the younger brother. One of his legs was dislocated at birth which forced him to an early use of plaster splints. The lack of care for the baby caught the attention of health professionals at the hospital. From that moment the family was marked as being at risk and the children found suitable for adoption. The baby was the first to be adopted. He did not return home after one of the medical appointments. The second youngest was next. Later she and her younger sister were taken by social care workers to an institutional refuge. The departure from home did not represent however an immediate rupture with the biological family as the two sisters continued to visit their parents at the weekends. The real divide came after the situation went public.

The life-changing moment which marked a new stage in Beatrice's life narrative came to surface when she met her adoptive mother. In this point in time there is a disconnection between her background as an abandoned child and the outset of a renewed life story that embraced acceptance, affection and love. From that moment on Beatrice start to visit the new family at the weekends to get familiar with all family members who were very welcoming. She spent progressively more time with the new family until the day arrived of formalizing the adoption process. This was a particularly memorable and joyful moment.

In the Beatrice's life narrative the process of family integration progressed closely attached to the course of her school path. At the initial stage of adoption and through the process of bonding with her new adoptive mother she was offered a chance to enrol in a private school. Beatrice felt no discrimination at school for being an adoptee. Given that her mother was single, she was characterized as having no father. Thus, Beatrice re-defined the self as fatherless character. By being adopted Beatrice was distinguished from their school peers for enclosing a different life experience. This was critical in the construction of the self as someone who was different from others. According to her point of view this opened a window for potential discrimination which at the end, didn't materialize. Ultimately the adoption was experienced as a minor difference in her life story.

The adoptive mother was vital to her school life. On year one of adoption, she failed in school for not being able to deal with the emotional disturbance resulting from the adoption process. At that point she considered the possibility of dropping out school. However the support from the foster mother was crucial and for that she remains deeply grateful to this day. The thought of having a degree was completely unrealistic before adoption. Nevertheless, Beatrice was 'fed' by her mother's believe on her potential throughout the victory over the challenges posed in the day-by-day school course. For that reason she appointed her foster mother for conducting the academic ritual when she gained her degree. The mere thought of having a degree was completely unrealistic before adoption. The graduation day was a particularly exciting time shared with her mother. The sharing of joy and the real meaning of that degree was a benchmark in her family's coalescence. Beatrice closes her narrative expressing her sense of achievement underlining what at the end of the day matters the most: "It is wonderful to be loved... it is great, truly great... really wonderful."

*Amanda*

Amanda is twenty years old. She was adopted with two and a half years and holds no pre-adoption memories. She develops her life story narrative through memory flashes, either regarding painful, pleasant or simply amusing indelible episodes. Her narrative structure follows a temporal chronology, from childhood to college. The thread of her life story and her school career are referenced to interchangeably. Amanda shows a remarkable spontaneity and self-possession throughout her discourse. Her choice to laugh frequently and report singular episodes marked the entire narrative.

The first memory she holds is the arrival at her adoptive parents' house. She ran upstairs calling every woman there her mother. She remembers she was quite aggressive and restless those days and particularly hated the baby bed. It was an impossible business to force her to slip behind those bed bars. As her next-door neighbour took care of children, she baby-sit her when her mother went to work. Her care taker had a daughter a few years older than Amanda thus they become good friends playing games and messing around all the time. However being so young meant she was hurt quite frequently. In several moments she fall down and cut her head. Precisely on the day she was getting baptized she made a deep cut in her head which forced her to have some stitches at the hospital. Went to the hospital with the adoptive mother and the nanny and got some stitches. The

nanny always took care of her in the small accidents and diseases and continues to do so to this day. Also she would often pick her up from school when the adoptive mother had some appointment.

Amanda remembers she was very disobedient and talked aloud frequently at the private catholic school at which she was physically punished by the nuns on regular basis. She remembers one day she wrote that boys were rude and aggressive and beat up the children at the playground. As she wasn't allowed to speak badly of the school the mother superior forced her to re-write the essay. Amanda summoned vividly into her mind the school's summer recess and the feelings of freedom in the farm, playing with her friends, taking hose showers and wetting her feet in the tank. She also recalls less pleasant moments like when she fractured her coccyx and fainted. As she was in severe pain at the back bone the nuns carried her to the clinic where she waited for two hours before the doctor send her to the hospital. That day when her parents came to pick her up, no one knew of her whereabouts, fortunately a colleague told them she was hospitalized. While her parents panic and felt outraged, Amanda felt much mistreated at that moment. She also confided how she and her best girlfriend innocently nurtured the habit of sharing boyfriends every other day at the private school.

In the seventh year she left the catholic school to be enrolled in the public school. She was shocked with the social-economic and behaviour differences. While before she was 'the rebel girl', in public school she was the prissy girl at everyone's eyes. Despite the initial impact she end up deeply enjoying her life at the public school and during that course she made some of her best friends ever. She particularly enjoyed playing pranks in the classroom to tease the teachers. She remembers one teacher in particular who got absolutely furious with the pranks, which led her to accentuate even more the misconduct. She recalls how all students surrounded that teacher jumping around, which turned her red angry and how it was a treat for Amanda and her colleagues.

After junior high, she listed arts in the high school. Amanda spent some of her best years at this school, enjoyed the people there, the studies, and made good friends. From there she decided to study design and communication at the university. However, unlike the previous school experiences, the college was an immense disappointment. Amanda was shocked with the smallness and meanness of some colleagues. She remembers how everyone was highly competitive and hided the school work for avoiding exchanging ideas. Some of them even brag for never having read a book or gone to an exhibition. Amanda mentions some specific episodes where the professors asked students how many books they possessed to which some answered 'one or two'. On other occasions some students would launch damaging rumours regarding certain colleagues to make them barely seen by professors. This particular confluence of factors alongside with the existence of a low demanding culture regarding the school tasks prevent her to identify with the college. In spite of the bad experience Amanda is strongly committed to carry on studies by registering in a master degree and to find a job. She feels somewhat immature at this point and acknowledges she has still much to learn. Nevertheless, Amanda is willing to take what day-by-day life provides and will always continue to follow life's free flow. The issue of adoption arises when Amanda asks the interviewer if she should not have talked about adoption. She told adoption is not a problem for her and clarify

with a situation in which her physical education teacher questioned the age of her parents and Amanda spoke with great tranquility that she was adopted.

*Freda*

The Freda's life narrative is organized chronologically revolving around the stream of her school life. The themes emerging in her narrative evolve throughout a pathway that begins at the elementary school and follows all the way to the present day, her life as it is currently at the college. Along the course of her narrative Freda selects several key events or striking episodes which are both key references in time as 'landmarks' in the construction of her narrative identity.

Freda has twenty-two years old and went through adoption when she was five months old. Her life narrative begins by acknowledging the critical role that life in school had on her development as a human being emphasizing the feeling of care she holds from the educational institutions. Freda highlights how much she has grown through the various different life stages she experienced during school time. The most significant episode, she recalls, was the moment their adoptive parents went through the divorce. This was a particular traumatic event and a significant family crisis which was overcome, largely due to the support of the staff members at the school. She was very fond of her adoptive father, thus, even though she was only six, she requested to live with her father. That did not happen, although Freda kept a close relationship with her father with her mother's concordance and support. Freda conveys that her brother, one year younger, went up to three years before realizing their parents had a divorce.

Although Freda recalls not having any conversation on the subject with her parents, she always knew she was adopted. Unlike many other adoptees, Freda takes this fact very smoothly and shows no problems in discussing the thematic. She confessed the desire to meet her biological mother by mere curiosity over her provenance. She is curious on whether she resembles physically with her and wonders if there are any brothers and how this other family looks like.

During high school at the private school, Freda's representation of a rebellious teenager overlapped with a period she was struggling with nervous anorexia. She was fifteen and started to miss classes, to leave school unauthorized, and to smoke cigarettes and have lunch at the cafe. She progressively skipped meals to the point she was hospitalized. At that moment she experienced a powerful insight showing her that was not the right path to follow. This event projected her into a long journey towards full recovery.

Shortly after this significant occurrence her adoptive parents decided she should change school, thus she was enrolled in a public school when the new school year began. This particular event was a remarkable turning point in her life course as she was introduced to a new and broader world she was unaware of. The ground zero in the new public school was difficult and somewhat painful. This was because the school structure was enormous and Freda was not familiar with the new routines and student viewpoints. By the fact she dressed and act differently from everybody else her peers disliked her immediately and she was rapidly discarded under the condition of being 'the private school's girls' or the 'Barbie'. In the course of this sinuous and initial adaptation, Freda

went so far as wanting to drop out school. Fortunately, she was gradually adjusting and mingling with her colleagues to the extent that currently these are some of her best friends.

The second year in the public school was shown to be a particularly problematic time to Freda as her first and major best friend, who was her refuge and connection to the new school environment, changed schools. Freda was highly disturbed and felt she was left alone once again which led her to request class changing. However her colleagues did not accept it well, they felt disregarded which sparked a flurry of discussions. Nonetheless, at the 'end of the day' they were reconciled and resumed a friendship that lasts to this day.

Freda's integration in the new public school was however coincident with a series of ruptures with former friendships she prized highly from the previous life at the private school. At the time of one of these meaningful ruptures Freda was on school holidays in Algarve hosted in the beach house of a recent friend and school colleague. From there she made friends with a beach volleyball group of adolescents. She learned an important lesson, when a friendship ends a new one is about to arise. Freda confesses that nobody is replaceable, but a new friendship can somehow help fill the void left by a friendship that ended. In that same school year, traumatically, two of Freda's best friends passed away due to cancer and a car crash. This was a particularly disturbing time for Freda in which the support of her school colleagues was paramount.

To be enrolled in the university represented an additional milestone in Freda's life narrative. Again she made several friends with whom she lost contact for having changed universities at the second year. After two years studying in the new university she was diagnosed with depression. Freda assures however she learned a lot by facing that health condition and is today a better human being at its expense. Freda learned more about friendships and how going through painful life experiences can help in the scrutiny of true friendships. At that point her 'true' friends step forward and took care of her. Some of them used to step by her house pushing her out of bed to a have a coffee and a small chat. Freda feels these moments were critical to her recovery. She also learned how to follow her own thoughts and to value her own will over the others. While before depression she acted in function of the others' viewpoints afterwards she started to act more accordingly to her own will.

Freda concludes his biographical narrative stressing that every day her subconscious reminds her that she is and always will be an adoptee. This identity landmark is particularly emphasised at the time of her birthday. Frequently, she is convinced that her biological mother still thinks of her, even though she avoided meeting her by fear of rejection. Nowadays Freda prefers to live on the illusion rather than taking a chance. However, it is quite possible that any day Freda will contact a social worker to help her find her biological mother.

## Discussion

The case studies were organized around three different situations arising in the researching field. One adopted youth had a late adoption after the age of nine. The

adoption took place at two and a half years old in the second case, while in the third case the adoption occurred at five months age, being the youngster diagnosed with mental health condition. Such situations seem to correspond to those faced by health professionals who work with adoption.

In the first situation, case Beatrice, the young later adoptee, has constructed very intense affective narratives. The memory of abandonment, of the abuse and of the period in which she lived in residential care was very vivid and traumatic. In the case of Beatrice, this experience is integrated. The affects, though intense, are arranged in a way that turns her life history into a rich learning experience. In a previous study (Vieira & Henriques, 2013a), we argued how this affects can appear in a raw manner. They disturb the narrative, drawing a circularity that repeatedly jumps between past and present, building a fragmentary history. Beatrice accepts abandonment as something that was inevitably imposed to her which caused an antagonism against the way of living of the biological family. The meaning given to life story was quite significant in the construction of narrative identity. In Beatrice's narrative we found both a consciousness about the damaging past as a strong identification with the adoptive family. Another important element in the construction of narrative identity in this case was the fear to be perceived as different by peers. The voice of classmates and friends appear here as a kind of standardization that cannot be evaded. In the case of Beatrice this fear was not confirmed given that her school colleagues saw her has someone carrying a different life experience rather than someone different. Ultimately, it is important to note that in this case the theme of abandonment and adoption has been central in the life narrative. It emerged as a key issue with which the protagonist had to understand and make sense of. Adoption also appears as a landmark in the identity, a theme always full of conflicting emotions.

In the case where the girls were adopted between five months and two and a half years old the life narratives followed a trajectory given by culture: the school career. In the narratives of Freda and Amanda the elements of narrative identity crossed the school career, giving it a particular colouring corresponding to personal characteristics, so this course was marked by the unique way each one lives (narrates) their experiences. The personal issues were bounded to the narrative course, giving it a particular flavour. In the case of Amanda, the critical point was the conflict with authority figures, on face of that she reacts with defiance and irreverence. Irreverence by expansiveness appeared also in additional situations as a significant element of the narrative identity of Amanda.

In both cases the theme of adoption was very peripherally addressed. In Amanda's case the issue arises when she asks the interviewer if she should not have talked about adoption. On this account she refers to a specific moment when her physical education teacher questioned her about their parents' age over which she articulated quite easily about adoption. In both Freda and Amanda cases, adoption does not appear as a problem or as an important issue. Although in the case of Amanda, who was adopted at the age of two and a half, the abandonment may have left marks, this does not appear in her life narrative.

In the case of Freda the diagnosis of psychological condition appears as complexification of the narrative by creating new episodes were the protagonist had to overcome the difficulties and limits imposed by the diseases. In the case of Freda, several

critical episodes affected her wellbeing, nervous anorexia, depression and mourning two close friends. Each of these situations has unleashed a new narrative course, which tended to resolve itself into a state of renewal and learning, in which new elements were added to her worldview. The challenges posed by diseases were defining elements in the construction of her narrative identity. Such diseases have created unique situations which cause reactions and attitudes that marked the action of the protagonist in her life narrative. On the other hand, some situations have arisen from the very own ethos of the character, which gave momentum to the challenging overcoming of her own psychological conflicts, self-imposed limitations or prejudice of others. It is remarkable that in this case the issue of adoption emerges as a curiosity to know where she came from, although Freda puts it on suspension for fear of rejection by her biological mother.

When we examine all the three cases at once for finding commonalities we can suggest that each of life narratives is marked by questions and personal characteristics that not only emerge as key elements of the narrative identity but move on through the lives, questioning them. In most cases, such issues appear as difficulties that put obstacles on personal development and that for this reason must be solved. Such problems are different in each case, according to differences in personal characteristics and life trajectories. This does not mean that we cannot find parallels or similarities. A very important common characteristic of the cases is the choice of schooling as the leitmotiv of life narratives. In the life stories of adopted youths the theme 'school' appears in two different ways. Firstly the school appears as the main reference in the chronological construction of life stories. Secondly, the school appears as the locus of relationships among peers, which exert a massive influence on the construction of identity.

The choice of school as a reference in chronological construction of life stories is very meaningful. The school is a cultural context that provides not only a chronological dimension easy to be perceived through the evolution of degrees (school years), accompanying the trajectory of development of individuals from infancy through adolescence, as it operates as a space of socialization, in which people establish a social group. This group works as a very important reference in the construction of narrative identity of our research subjects. The school also appears as an important place of change of personal values and identity along the psychosocial development of the individual, which is in agreement with the findings of Gonçalves (2012). It is interesting that while the school context is the preferential reference in the construction of narrative identity, family emerges as a secondary reference. This seems to have been confirmed by studies involving a larger number of cases (Vieira & Henriques, 2013b). It is only in cases where family relationships are shown awfully traumatic that family appears as the main scenario whereby the life story unfolds. In the cases where family relationships seem to be harmonics, including the case Freda involving a divorce, the role of parents in the development of narrative identity is null. Therefore, a significant question arises, is this feature of the narrative construction of identity in adopted person or a general pattern? School choice as a reference to the chronological construction of life stories is important. The school arises here as the main scenario where the process of psychosocial development occurs and where the narrative identity is built. It is on school grounds that the major battles are fought and individuals face the most difficult challenges in the path

of growth and achievement of maturity. That is what is told in the life stories of Amanda and Freda. The case of Beatrice stands out as an illuminating counterpoint. It is necessary a more pressing challenge to displace school as a reference in the narrative construction of identity to the background.

The second point is the role of school as the preferential locus of relationships among peers. The process of identity construction occurs not only in relation to schooling and teachers. They seem to have an important role in the construction of life stories, although secondary. The issues related to the relationship between peers emerges here as a key point corroborating the findings by Gonçalves (2008) and Sugimura and Shimizu (2011). So is the struggle for recognition and search for inclusion in a social group within school, a main challenge and centralizing element in the construction of narrative identity of these young people. It is in the relationship with peers that identity is negotiated and established. If one is not recognized by the group as a member and as individual there is no scope for the person to be at all. Not being acknowledged here means inferiority, humiliation and impossibility to be and act in the world. The fear of lack of recognition resembles fear the vacuum. Not be recognized is to be nothing. This fact points to the importance of interpersonal relationships to the identity construction and well-being within the school.

## Conclusions

This study shows that as the logical-chronological construction of life narratives is related to the organization of identity and personality, so too is the experience of schooling. What our research subjects are saying is that is through school we grow up, build our identity and become adults. The fact that school has such a significant role in the development of young people already entitles it as a potential space for health. The fact that young have produced coherent narratives centred on the school means that they were able to build a structured narrative identity and are managing to cope with the challenges and difficulties posed by life. This is a clear sign of mental wellbeing (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Such narratives patterns found in this study strongly suggest that school may play a critical role in organizing the identity and personality of people. According with young people, what happens in school has the potential either to impact positively in the construction of wellbeing, as in case things go wrong, be a source of anxiety. In this sense, our study points to the need of providing special attention to the management of peer relationship in school. Concluding, we can say with Sugimura and Shimizu (2011) that attention to adolescent identity development in day-today contexts can not only promote psychological wellbeing and adjustment among young people, but also prevent the social loss caused by delayed psychosocial development.

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