

Putting School in Its Place: A Narrative Analysis of the Educational Memories of Late Adult and Elder People

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Abstract: This paper analyzes narratives regarding educational experiences and memories of a group of adult and elder Spaniards. Data was gathered through life history interviews, most often by participant's grandchildren. Schooling is examined as a life-transition from a life-span perspective. While the participants of the study attended formal education under very different socio-historical and political conditions, a number of shared patterns emerge in the data. First, participants on average spent little time in schools, yet overall would have liked to continue their education. Both the reasons to leave school and the curriculum in schools are organized around gender categories. Second, the implications of early school withdrawal are contextualized in the rural context in which participants grew up and which provided adult social roles and occupations that were only partially connected to formal education. Third, participants show an orientation towards instrumental and school skills, which are also acquired and expanded in out-of-school contexts. The findings are discussed in relation to general theories of development in later life and situated in historical context.

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1. Introduction

When human beings make sense of their experiences through narrative, they take advantage of the two central resources that characterize this form of discourse. First, events are organized temporally, whether in chronological order (in parallel to the original events; LABOV, 1972) or reorganized anachronically for different rhetorical purposes (CAPPS & OCHS, 2001). Second, events are evaluated, storytellers present their stance towards narrated experiences, and provide an affective grid to interpret the actions recapitulated in narratives. Developmental studies have become increasingly interested in the role of narrative in the construction of the life course. The relevance of this configuration

is captured both in classic statements of life-span developmental psychology (NEUGARTEN, 1996) and in the most recent work in cultural psychology (BRUNER, 2002). [1]

From a life-span perspective, broadly considered as a perspective that studies life events and developments during "wide" periods of time, an explicit focus on narrative allows an examination of central questions of life-long development. It is both a stereotypical attribution and a relevant psychological trait of late adulthood and aging that individuals spend a good deal of their time remembering, reflecting on and retelling past experiences in the process of constructing their own life course. These reconstructions play a key role in the construction of the self and its sense of agency at different moments of the life-course, including the narrators present (NEUGARTEN, 1996). The selective and organizational nature of narrative activity facilitates the identification of key events and transitions in the life-course (SETTERSTEN & MAYER, 1997), as these are made explicit or indirectly elaborated in conversations about the past, life history narratives and other forms of reminiscing. Further, the evaluation and interpretation of these inflexion points form part of their narration, and this evaluative stance is a process that in itself changes during the life-course (GROB, KRINGS & BANGERTER, 2001). [2]

In this context, narratives about schooling are particularly relevant, since it is a trait of modern societies that one's experiences in the formal educational system determine many of the opportunities that will become available in the life-course. As such, biographical studies of experiences in school have been of central interest for the historical study of education and also for ethnographic educational research projects. However, schooling as a developmental transition is also of importance for some of the classic concerns of life-span developmental psychology (BALTES, REESE & LIPSITT, 1980). It can be used to simultaneously explore *normative age-graded influences* (schooling is often a compulsory and universal experience organized around chronological criteria), *normative history-graded influences* (educational practices and policies change through time providing different experiences to successive cohorts of students) and *non-normative events* (individual's experiences in schools are unique and its effects cannot be reduced to sociological profiles or statistical tendencies). [3]

The purpose of this paper is to precisely examine a set of narratives about schooling using a combination of methods derived from narrative analysis with some of the general concerns of a life-span perspective applied to development in later life. The data source is a set of oral biographical interviews about schooling obtained from late adult and elder Spaniards. As we will see, the total sample of participants comprises quite a heterogeneous group in terms of age and the socio-historical conditions under which they attended school—given the multiple changes that have taken place in Spanish history during the twentieth century. Yet, a number of common narrative themes emerge regarding how schooling is retrospectively incorporated in the life-course and how this incorporation is interpreted. The recollection and analysis of our materials have proceeded in an inductive and open-ended fashion, but as sets of narratives have

been examined, certain topics have emerged as relevant. Specifically, the present study attempts to answer three research questions: (a) overall, how is school remembered and assessed, (b) how many participants consider their schooling excessively brief and how is this brevity explained and interpreted and, (c) in what terms do participants talk about the acquisition and display of schooled knowledge ("general culture") or instrumental skills (literacy and numeracy) in out-of-school contexts. [4]

Our approach to narrative is primarily contextualist (BAUMAN, 1986). At a proximal level, we take the interviews from which our data is extracted to be collaborative accomplishments in which interlocutors contribute to build an oral biography in particular directions as a product of turn by turn developments in the narrative conversation (EDWARDS, 1997). At a more distal level, this unfolding is mediated by the shared histories and kinship ties of interlocutors that transcend the particular interview session, and are also embedded in larger social and historical transformations that configure the intergenerational relations and transformations that affect these conversational partners (see discussion below). [5]

With these theoretical considerations in mind, the present study focuses primarily on the content, and its organization, of the educational biographies that we have collected. To do so, narratives have been edited and organized following conventions and strategies developed in ethnopoetics (HYMES, 1996a) and stanza analysis (GEE, 1996). These approaches see narratives as organized and purposeful forms of discourse and use tools and terms derived from poetics and literary analysis to edit transcripts. Specifically, ethnopoetics and stanza analysis consider lines/verses as the basic unit of discursive activity and groups these into stanzas according to both content and rhetorical criteria. Superficial patterning in the narrative, through parallelisms and different stylistic figures, is used as an interpretive key to identify themes and significant events in the narrator's life story. Also, ethnopoetics, as a primarily inductive approach, has proven to be fruitful in the study of very different kind of narratives and forms of discourse across institutional settings (e.g. GEE, 1996; RIESSMAN, 1993), elicitation conditions (HYMES, 1981; MINAMI & McCABE, 1991), cultural contexts (MINAMI & McCABE, 1991; POVEDA, 2002) and modes of communication (HYMES, 1996b). Therefore, we consider this approach particularly useful in the research context of this paper where a) participants produced different kinds of life-history narratives that were not elicited within a common semi-structured interview schedule and b) the research questions were formulated during the process of analysis itself, rather than before data collection. [6]

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study included twenty-six adult and elder individuals (seventeen female and nine male) who volunteered to be part of a university class project on oral biography (see below). The majority of them were raised and currently live in different villages or small cities of mid-western Spain, an inland region of the country that is mostly. Basic descriptive information about the participants (and some descriptive data on schooling) is summarized in Table 1:

Participants	Central tendency	Range
Current age in years	mean: 72	50-92
Years of schooling	mean: 4.2	0-9
Age during schooling in years	median: 9.5	5-14
Period of schooling (year date)	mode: 1930-1937	1921-1956

Table 1: Descriptive information on participants [7]

2.2 Procedure

Given the contextualist approach outlined above, it follows that we consider the form of our data to be closely tied to the particular conditions under which it was obtained and the analytical lens used to examine it. Therefore, the procedures of the study and its implications will be discussed at some length. [8]

The oral biographies were produced through semi-structured interviews on life-experiences and transitions made by undergraduate students as an optional project in a course on education and development during adult and later life. The requirement was to engage a late adult or elder person (without any other specification regarding participant's characteristics) in a biographical interview. In the majority of cases, students interviewed their own grandparents or other older family members. Interviews could cover participant's full life span or focus on specific periods or events of participant's life. In the first case, discussions about school, when they appear, are only one part of the interview. In the second case, schooling has been a frequent topic of more focused interviews (for example, experiences during the Spanish Civil War are another frequent focal topic). With participant's consent the interview materials (audio or video recordings and transcriptions) have been archived and made available for analysis in successive years by faculty and students in the education program. For example, in this paper, the first author was the instructor of the above course and the second and third author students in the course and the three of us decided to continue the analysis of the interview materials. In this study we use as our database a subset of twenty-six biographies comprised by the interviews monographically centered on educational experiences and the segments of life-span biographies that refer

to the time spent in formal education or that participants thematically tie to this period. [9]

Obviously, the fact that participant and interviewer have kinship ties and a close relationship facilitates constructing a relaxed and informal situation for the interview and biographical conversation. However, the specific family configuration of the interview has more significant consequences for the conversational situation and the narrative that emerges from it. First, it is an instance of *intergenerational communication* (cf. COUPLAND, COUPLAND & GILES, 1991; GROB, KRINGS & BANGERTER, 2001) in which the elder interlocutor frequently takes as his or her task making the socio-historical conditions under which his or her schooling took place (and thus the consequences it has had and the potential difference with current times) comprehensible to the younger interlocutor. [10]

Second, it is an instance of *intrafamilial communication* in which interlocutors partially share a life-history and kin identification. As a result, often the main events and content of the interviews are already partially known to the interviewer, and the interview is precisely designed to elaborate on themes that have already been established as relevant in the interviewee's life-span. More importantly, in this family context, educational experiences are an especially visible topic, since most of the interviewees are members of the first generation to reach higher education, and further, their chosen field of study and work is education-related. In this context, narrators build as their task presenting themselves favorably in this transition (cf. LABOV, 1972), by playing a role in it or highlighting other paths to "school-like learning." They also point-out and the responsibilities that accompany the opportunities that have been granted to the younger interlocutor. [11]

In short, we believe that several aspects of the research questions emerge from the narrative themes that develop in our data and that these themes are closely intertwined with the specific conditions under which the narrative interviews take place. [12]

As explained above, interview transcripts were edited into lines and stanzas using a variety of linguistic and paralinguistic cues considered in ethnopoetics and stanza analysis. Then, narratives were examined in successive steps geared at uncovering commonalities in the educational stories. This analysis allowed us to propose a general narrative plot (see Table 2) that was articulated in different argument strands. These later strands were examined in depth and tied to particular narratives to understand how general educational processes played out in individual life histories. [13]

3. Results

As a group, the narratives gravitate around a plot that is partially or fully developed in practically all interviews that deal with educational experiences. The *narrative problem* (OCHS, RUDOLPH, TAYLOR & SMITH, 1992) centers on the fact that most participants spent very few years in formal education, yet would have liked to continue their education. The result, especially given the educational configurations in narrator's families that we pointed out above, is that participant's narrative efforts center not so much in describing daily life in schools, as in explaining and contextualizing the factors that led to early school withdrawal. Simultaneously, storytellers provide parallel accounts of how they acquired and gave meaning to "school skills" (literacy and numeracy) outside of school during their life course. A schematic summary of the narrative plot that captures the biographies we have analyzed is presented in Table 2. This schema draws on a version of the narrative components developed by OCHS et al. (1992). These authors provide a model of narrative that focuses on stories where there is a central problem that precipitates both an evaluation (description of narrator's internal response) and an explanation of its nature and consequences in time. The rest of this section will delve into the meaning of different narrative themes that elaborate on each of these components: (a) the assessment of schooling, (b) the process of leaving school and the role gender played in this process, and (c) the display and development of instrumental skills in out-of-school contexts.

Problem	Narrators had to leave school early or did not have the opportunity to attend school.
Evaluation	Narrators would have liked to continue their education.
Explanation	Leaving school was necessary in order to contribute to support the family and assume adult social roles. Rural schools prepared students for this early leave.
Reaction	Despite limited educational experiences, participants engage with and orient towards instrumental skills (literacy and numeracy). Formal education is an important investment that has been achieved in successive family generations.

Table 2: Narrative plot in participant's educational biographies [14]

3.1 General assessment of schooling as a life-transition

The most basic conclusion that can be extracted from the interviews relates to the overall quality of the school memories that participants produce. As can be seen in Table 3, the majority state in clear terms whether school was a pleasant experience or an unpleasant experience, and only a minority of the narratives do not evaluate explicitly the period of time spent in formal education.

Assessment	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	16	62
Negative	3	11
Polarized	2	8
No Assessment	5	19
Total	26	100

Table 3: Assessment of time spent in school [15]

The minority of negative recollections are directly related to unpleasant experiences with teachers who made use of physical punishment and other forms of intimidation, not uncommon practices in the time period that is being discussed. In turn, "polarized assessments" refer to narratives in which both pleasant and unpleasant experiences are reported, precisely because different teachers with very different ways of relating to students are recalled. In the following example, J.G., a 78 year old male, describes in successive extracts different teachers whose behavior towards the students was quite different (stanzas and lines are numbered consecutively although fragments have been omitted):

Example 1: Polarized assessments¹

Stanza 1: Summary

- 1 teachers there were of all kinds
- 2 there were some that were compassionate
- 3 they did not hit too much
- 4 but some

Stanza 2: First teacher

- 5 the first I went was called Mr. Angel
- 6 but they called him as a nickname "tantrums"
- 7 because he pulled your hair from behind and from the ears
- 8 when we did not know our lesson and all those things
- 9 we feared him very much

Stanza 3: Second teacher

- 10 and later when he died
- 11 we then went to another teacher that was called Mr. Francisco
- 12 that that one was a very good teacher

1 Transcripts are organized into lines using idea units and prosodic boundaries as starting criteria. False starts, repetitions and self-corrections have been omitted but are considered in the organization of lines. Recurrent discourse markers, conjunctions and different rhetorical strategies are used to re-organize lines into more compact structures. Stanzas are grouped according to semantic criteria, although they are most often also marked by prosodic and interactional boundaries. Titles have been added to guide analysis and comprehension. The translation into English has been as literal as possible, with sentence structures and phraseology transformed minimally. See the [Appendix](#) for the Spanish version.

13 but it turned out that he was in charge of the whole town
14 he was a teacher he was the mayor he was the clerk
15 he dominated everything
16 that one was more serious
17 that one had an "oak cane"
18 and when someone did something
19 well he would hit us "once in a while" with the cane (...)

Stanza 4: Fourth teacher

20 later this one was when the war
21 before the war or at the beginning of the war
22 came one from Alcalá de la Vega [village name]
23 a certain Mr. Julian who was a good teacher
24 that man taught
25 he was very "charitable"
26 and a man a very good person
27 and very smart
28 he was small but he was very big [16]

In this fragment, J.G. successively describes and assesses the behavior of different teachers. His evaluation is graded starting with the teacher that produced more fear in the children and caused larger reticence to schooling and ends with the most appreciated teacher both for his behavior towards the students and his skill as an educator. The opposition between the first and the last highlights the dissociation that the narrator produces when describing his second teacher. In this case, the teacher is recalled in positive terms as an educator and an authority figure in the community (given the different political and administrative responsibilities that he held in the locality) even if he did physically punish his students "sporadically." [17]

The disassociation between the narrator's stance regarding teachers' capacity as educators and their behavior towards children is especially revealing in terms of life-span narratives. Within the historical periods in which our participants were schooled, physical punishment by teachers was part of their "normative" behavior, even if the legislative status of these actions was not clearly articulated. In consequence, it could be argued that a retrospective narrative that attempts to recover the ideological and moral order of the original period of the narrative events may produce different evaluative statements, in contrast to a retrospective narrative that reinterprets events from the ideological and moral standpoint of the narrator's present. Further, in this matrix, the narrator can construe him or herself in different positions regarding present views about past events, past views about past events (or even possibly past views about present events, although this type of narrative is not produced in our data). In other words, narrators can portray themselves through their assessments as broadly "ahead of their times" or "progressive," "conventional" or "conservative." In this case, we would seem to

have a somewhat conventional participant who does not question openly teacher's use of physical punishment (a hardly defensible position in contemporary times) and can still assess positively teacher's capacities as an educator. How narrators explicitly articulate different ideological orders regarding each of the time frames involved in the telling (the storyteller's present and the narrative past, cf. BAUMAN, 1986) emerge as a powerful element in the narrative themes that will be discussed below. [18]

The combination of a short schooling history, explicitly perceived as brief, and that this experience is most often recalled in positive terms sets the stage for what is, in fact, the principal story topic that is elaborated in the narratives: the process of abandoning school and the development of a "counter-narrative" on the consequences of schooling and the acquisition of "school knowledge." The construction of these narratives opens a window to the social and economic order in which participants were raised, and to the role formal education played in this system. Gender appears as a central element in this configuration, since it determines the total amount of years that are allocated to formal education, the school curriculum and the role that this curriculum plays in students' insertion into adult life and responsibilities. In the following sub-headings we will successively examine narratives that develop the interrelationship between gender and schooling and narratives that discuss alternatives for the acquisition of "school skills and knowledge." [19]

3.2 Learning in school, leaving school and gender

The most obvious way in which gender emerges as a relevant category is in how families saw formal education as a different kind of investment for their sons and daughters. For male children, education could be a path to professional and economic development, while for female students education was a transitory period during which some basic skills could be acquired to eventually become a house-wife or help adult women in the family. In consequence, girls left school earlier; if choices had to be made as to who could continue studying (given economic constraints) male offspring would be the desired choice and in all these decisions children themselves had little say. In their stories, participants (especially female participants) are not indifferent to these dispositions The narrative provided by P.M., a 51 year old female, is one of the most clear cases in which this social order is contested and reassessed through time:

Example 2: Abandoning school and gender

Stanza 1: My siblings and school

- 1 we started to go to school
- 2 I liked it very much
- 3 my sister liked it less
- 4 and the boy did not like it at all
- 5 I went happily
- 6 and I liked it very very much

Stanza 2: My school years

7 well I was small I was I think five years old
8 because I did not want to go to the older class where my sister was
9 but I had to stay in kindergarten then
10 because my age I was smaller than my sister
11 and the following year I went to the other kindergarten class
12 at the time there was only the kindergarten class and the other one for all
the older children
13 and well I was like that in school until I was twelve years old

Stanza 3: Leaving school

14 that when I was twelve well they already took me out of school
15 I did not want to it made me very upset
16 I liked school very much
17 but since they said that I was a girl
18 well I had to be at home with my mother helping
19 and I also had to make an earning
25 so they put me to sew with a machine
26 and nothing and I was like that for many years until I got married

Stanza 4: My brother's school years

27 my brother went to school (for some time)
28 but he did not like at all going to school
29 he did not like at all going to school
30 he "skipped classes"
31 since he was a boy
32 and at the time men seemed to be the ones that had to study
33 the ones that had to know things
34 because the girls we had to be with your mothers to work
35 and "earn (money)" for the dowry
36 but "the house" "the house" was "the house"

Stanza 5: My brother leaves school

37 and well my brother was signed up to a private school
39 but he also "skipped classes"
40 and he did not go he did not want to and he missed (classes)
41 my father wanted that at all costs his son studied
42 and that he (became) a "successful and respected man" in life
43 us since we were girls no
44 it had to be help your mother at home
45 and learn to do the things of home
46 and that's it

47 so that then then later finally my brother
48 well that he did not study either
49 and they had to give up
50 and they had to take him out of school because he did not "do well"
51 because he did not want so "that is that"

Stanza 6: Retrospective assessments

52 back then you didn't realize too much
53 because the environment in which you lived was more or less like that
54 well it said that well that women
55 you only thought that you liked very much to study
56 that I would like to continue studying
57 already at my age some friends started to study "teacher education"
58 they studied here in the town
59 here they got their "secondary school degree"
60 and they made you jealous
61 then we "started to see" some women studying
62 that back then only a few (girls) studied
63 and of course you missed it
64 but at the time you did not realize completely of what this (really) was
65 then when the years go by is when you start to regret it more
66 you were jealous
67 you saw things
68 and like that [20]

In this narrative, P.M. provides a vivid and articulate account of her experiences as a female student and how her expectations were subordinated to her family's demands and her brother's privileges. The telling proceeds by unfolding its elements and preparing the stage for the closing retrospective evaluation of the reported events. Stanza 1 introduces the characters of the story and Stanzas 2-3 present P.M.'s own experiences in school and the circumstances surrounding her removal from school. Then the narrative turns to her brother's experiences, and P.M. builds two stanzas (Stanzas 4-5), that parallel her own account, in which her brother's experiences in school and the state of affairs that facilitated her brother leaving school are described. The *initiating* event (OCHS et al., 1992) of this part of the narrative is the aggravated discrimination that P.M. felt (and feels) between herself, who wanted to study and liked going to school but was nevertheless "forced" to leave school, and her brother, who did not want to study, and did not like to go to school, but was nevertheless given several opportunities until it became clear that he would not complete his formal education. [21]

This contrast is closely interwoven in the rhetorical design of the narrative. As stated, at the broadest level Stanzas 2-3 and Stanzas 4-5 form two symmetrical and opposing pairs describing the personal experiences of P.M. and her brother

—individual protagonists. However, within and across these stanzas a more general opposition and critique of gender roles is established. This opposition is developed in successive line arguments that progressively embed each other. In Stanza 3 (lines 17-19) the role of girls in general is presented and used to "explain" P.M.'s dropping out of school. In Stanza 4, (lines 31-33) the role of boys in general is presented in contrast to the above—note the parallel constructions that introduce each explanation: *como decían que era chica* ["since they said I was a girl"] (line 17) vs. *como era chico* ["since he was a boy"] (line 31). However, this new argument is again contrasted immediately with information on girl's roles (lines 34-36) recycling much of the information that was presented above. Further, in the final Stanzas, in which her brother's school abandoning is presented, this contrast is again explicitly articulated (lines 41-42 vs. lines 43-45). [22]

In terms of retrospective assessments, this narrative also illustrates the different alternatives that have been outlined above. It should be noted that the interview did not seek to explore explicitly notions regarding gender roles. However, in the processes of explaining her forced withdrawal from school, these categories emerge as central in the participant's story. The final stanza of the narrative elaborates her stance towards different ideologies, both at the time and currently. First, the "conventional" ideology of the time is presented (lines 52-54), which is used to mitigate somewhat her reactions at the time—which are expressed as a personal reaction that does not make any connections with other social processes (lines 52, 55 and 56). Second, a more "progressive" alternative available at the time is presented (an alternative that, obviously, was not contemplated positively by her family) (lines 57-59 and 61-62), accompanied by her own emotional reactions at the time (lines 60 and 63). Finally, a retrospective evaluation of these events as her life-course continued is elaborated (lines 64-68), in which she positions herself with one of the available alternatives and begins to show some awareness of the social categories and ideologies involved (albeit cryptically: *no te dabas bien cuenta de lo que en sí era* ["at the time you did not realize completely of what this (really) was"], line 64). From a historical perspective, this information regarding the educational conditions of rural girls and women in the Spanish 1950s is not surprising news (FLECHA, 1989). What is relevant for our discussion, and will be elaborated in the Conclusions, is how gender discrimination is explicitly articulated by some female participants and how this situation has played a central role in the configuration of their identities. [23]

A parallel theme that emerges in the above narrative is how the instruction received at school is related to possible roles and skills to be deployed in adult life. In the story, we see how there were alternative paths available for each gender that did require continued formal education (teacher education, further education in the professions)—not pursued by any of the protagonists of the narrative. However, our data shows that the majority of our participants did not even complete secondary education. In the rural socio-economic context of our study, the consequences of this unsuccessful schooling seem to be mitigated by the fact that there were other available (and traditionally sanctioned) adult roles and economic positions in the community, and for these positions schooling only played a partial role. Gender again articulates the place the school curriculum

occupies in this transition to adulthood, a curriculum that is designed with the expectation that the majority of students will not move beyond primary education. As it is also known, the curriculum (and often classes and schools as well) was gender segregated, with male and female students receiving instruction in different content areas appropriate for their expected responsibilities in life. In this context, participants see the curriculum as playing different roles in relation to their future adult life. For male participants, future work was in "the fields" (agriculture and farming), and for female participants, future work was in housekeeping. To meet these demands, schools designed different strategies for girls and boys. For girls, the curriculum included explicit instruction in different housekeeping tasks (sewing, cooking). For boys, schools provided opportunities for students to go directly to the fields and acquire by practice future agricultural and farming skills. In other words, female students acquired skills decontextualized from their actual site of application and their achievements were only relevant inside the educational institution, while male students acquired their knowledge through actual work in ongoing agricultural and farming activities. The contrasting brief narratives of T.R. (female, 86 years of age) and J.T. (male, 78 years of age) illustrate this clearly (the lines of both narratives are numbered continuously to facilitate the discussion):

Example 3: The curriculum and gender

Girl's curriculum

1 Only for girls
2 during the morning we had class
3 and in the afternoon we only dedicated ourselves to sewing
4 and while we were sewing we were singing the (multiplication) tables
5 that it is very pretty
6 we sang the (multiplication) table
7 and like that we learnt the (multiplication) table singing
8 and it was very easy (for us)
9 because we learned singing
10 and then we were sewing
11 we did everything at the same time
12 in the evening the only class we had was sewing

Boy's curriculum

13 Well at six years of age we started to go until fourteen (years of age)
14 but in those days in those days (...)
15 more to the fields than to other places
16 I was sent to water the vegetable gardens and all that
17 and to pick "olives"
18 to pick the olives
19 and we all went when it was raining or snowing
20 and the teacher would say to us

- 21 "the storm (people) are already here" (...)
22 after the war already then I was twelve years old
23 when the war and already then at that age "then" at that age
24 to school then to school no
25 to the fields to the fields [24]

As advanced, in T.R.'s narrative we see girls practicing sewing in class as a complement to learning and drilling the multiplication tables. Both activities are recalled in positive terms (line 5), but the narrative (and other interviews) do not make explicit that the students were actually sewing anything that would be used later outside of school—rather they practiced "patterns" and different kind of "stitches." The result is a portrait of school in which the curriculum is detached from later life. In contrast, in J.T.'s story we see how male students had direct contact with agricultural work and participated productively in it (including the perils of working outdoors, line 19). As a result, there is a much continuous transition between the life-stages at school and at work (lines 15 and 25). From a historical perspective, it should be noted that it has been argued that in the very different political periods that are reflected in our data (II Spanish Republic, Spanish Civil War and the first decades of Franco's dictatorship) the educational policies and ideologies especially designed for rural schools and environments varied significantly (HERNÁNDEZ, 2000). However, in the recollections of our participants, regardless of the political period, formal education seems to have similar roles in the social system. It is expected to be a brief experience that will prepare, through different means, male and female students for their distinct adult roles in a rural social system. [25]

The connection between in-and-out of school learning sites that is reflected in one of the above narratives relates to the last theme that emerges in our data as a counter-account of the process of early de-schooling: the acquisition and display of instrumental skills outside of formal education. [26]

3.3 Literacy and numeracy outside of school

We suggested in the procedure section that participants present narrative portraits of themselves as oriented positively to the knowledge and skills that are acquired through formal education, even if their experience in the system was brief. One of the main strategies to develop this topic is by presenting alternative paths through which these skills are acquired and alternative sites in which it is relevant to display them. The basic instrumental skills, literacy and numeracy, are the most salient goals of schooling. Their acquisition is an educational goal and, for participants, their mastery is connected to further acquisitions and displays of competence. Literacy allows participants to gain new knowledge about the world through print and books and numeracy allows participants to face everyday challenges in which numerical operations are necessary (in everyday economic transactions, promotions at work, etc.). In the narratives there are two general story lines about how these skills are acquired and deployed. In the first plot,

participants have had very little (or null) formal education and, therefore, literacy and numeracy are completely (or mostly) acquired outside of school. In the second plot, participants have had a longer experience with school, where basic literacy and numeracy are acquired, but these skills are expanded or gain new meaning through life experiences outside of school. The following fragments, by S.L. (male, 72 years of age) and M.P. (female, 80 years of age), show how mathematics and reading, respectively, were acquired outside of school by participants with a very brief or non-existent school experience:

Example 4: The acquisition of instrumental skills outside of school

Numeracy

1 Then I also had my grandfather
2 he also taught me
3 when I only knew how to add
4 he wrote the multiplication table on the wall
5 and told me that how long was I going to take to learn it
6 which I did with my son

Literacy

Stanza 1: Introduction

7 To school I have never gone
8 I lost my father when I was five years of age
9 and they did not take me to school

Stanza 2: Learning to read

10 the little I know
11 is because I like to read very much
12 and my mother taught me
13 of course! To spell
14 and that is all I know

Stanza 3: Current literacy

15 when there is a word a little bit "special"
16 to the dictionary!
17 and if not I ask a neighbor [27]

In these narratives we see how full sets of skills are acquired outside of school. S.L. went to school between four and eight years of age, where he learned how to add, but he was taught multiplication by his grandfather at home (even if the brief story reports a most peculiar pedagogical approach). The second narrative is told by a participant who did not attend school at all, but in her brief account she provides information on the role of literacy during her life course: how it was taught by her mother (lines 12-13), how literacy has played a role in the acquisition of the (little) knowledge she has (lines 10-11) and how she solves her current literacy demands, with other print materials (lines 16) or with support from

other social actors (line 17)—"the neighbor" is the interviewer, a relationship they have had for years. [28]

The second plot outlined above is illustrated in the following examples, in which participants report acquiring instrumental skills through formal education but assign new meaning to these acquisitions in alternative contexts. J.L. (male, 82 year of age), reports how he used his literacy skills, and M.N. (female, 66 years of age) discusses the role that mathematics played in her adult life (both fragments are only one segment of larger narratives in which participants elaborate on specific episodes that illustrate the relevance of the skills they are discussing):

Example 5: The expansion of instrumental skills outside of school

Literacy

(...)

- 1 in the fields since I was always reading
- 2 I taught another kid to read
- 3 that this one learned very fast
- 4 he must have been very intelligent!
- 5 in school we read wrote and we did some "mathematics"
- 6 but there were others that had more courses history science
- 7 I only went to school to learn the basics
- 8 and then to work to be able to eat
- 9 although I would have liked to continue studying
- 10 but even so to the fields I took my books to read (...)

Numeracy

Stanza 1: Introduction

- 11 me mathematics
- 12 well that I did not like them that I did not like them
- 13 I studied because I had no choice
- 14 but and do you know when I began to get interested?
- 15 mostly in percentages and that
- 16 well I had studied it
- 17 after getting married (...)

Stanza 2: Explanation

- 18 because you go shopping
- 19 and since it is your money
- 20 well you are interested in knowing what you are being charged and what you are not being charged
- 21 I when I was single they sent me shopping
- 22 "here have money, how much, bdbdbddb"
- 23 well it did not worry me if it cost more or it cost less

24 but later since it was my money (...) [29]

In contrast to the previous reports, in these narratives participants acknowledge the role that schooling played in the acquisition of basic skills. However, their account reflects how these skills are transformed during the life course. J.L. explains how he acquired basic mechanical literacy in school but used these abilities to read and acquire knowledge through reading books outside of school: at home (not transcribed) and in the fields, where he also taught another peer, who did not attend school, to read. It should be noted, that several of the narratives of participants who worked as shepherds, as opposed to agricultural work, report having quite an amount of spare time to read and peer teach and learn while working. M.N.'s account is even more significant, since her stance towards mathematics as a domain is transformed radically in each context of use. While in school it was not a preferred subject (lines 12-13) as an adult, when applying mathematical knowledge to manage her own expenses, she becomes interested and competent in it. The rest of the narrative (not transcribed) is a succession of episodes in which M.N. during shopping was able to discover mistakes in the calculations of the vendors, which she pointed out and corrected. [30]

To summarize the results, we have a set of narratives of personal experiences about school by a group of adult and elder participants who spent few years in the formal educational system but, nevertheless, recall these experiences in positive terms. Under these circumstances, favored by the interview setting itself, participants provide an alternative account regarding the cultural consequences and meanings of schooling. These alternative narratives provide, on one hand, information on the social system (regarding gender politics, economic context and demands) that precipitated an early school abandonment and, on the other, a portrait of participants' orientation towards the skills and knowledge that traditionally are associated with formal education. From a socio-historical perspective, it can be considered that the narratives provide first-hand testimonies of the conditions and circumstance under which schooling took place in key moments of Spain's recent history. From a psychological-developmental perspective, the narratives open a window to understand the role that schooling has played in the construction of participants' life-trajectories and identities. To build a fuller historical account of the interviews we would need information and methodologies that have not been utilized in this study. Therefore, in the conclusions section we will turn to discuss some of the implications that can be drawn from our data from a life-span perspective, while including the historical information that is available in the narratives and other bibliographical sources. [31]

4. Conclusions

Participants' narrative accounts can be examined from two standpoints regarding life-span development. Each standpoint provides information, broadly speaking, on corresponding aspects that have been of traditional concern for this approach to human development. First, the narratives report events and attitudes that are located in the (distant) past, thus a "comparison" with contemporary interpretations of comparable events (e.g. regarding how students enter, stay and leave school and with what consequences), would give us indirect evidence of possible cohort differences and historical changes affecting human development (BALTES, REESE & LIPSITT, 1980; GROB, KRINGS & BANGERTER, 2001). Second, even though the narratives report past events, participants present their contemporary views on these events and, thus provide information on their current ideologies and concerns. This aspect is relevant for our understanding of psychological development in later life. Further, as we explained above, it is possible to disentangle different positions that may be seen as "progressive," "conventional" or "conservative" in the narratives. Hence our findings challenge the stereotypical (and academic) descriptions of aging as a process in which social actors become increasingly conservative and resistant to change. In conclusion, we will address a selection of concerns regarding both cohort processes and development in later life. [32]

Different pieces of our data highlight the relevance of gender categories throughout the life-span and later life. These findings are relevant for our understanding of gender relations during late adulthood and elder life (PAOLETTI, 1998). Some of our participants, especially the younger females (Example 2), showed a critical awareness of gender asymmetries during their life-course, particularly as these relate to the opportunities made available through schooling. What is relevant is that this consciousness continues to develop in later life, a process that should help question portraits of elders as disengaging with the external social order or conforming to traditional social roles. However, this assertion also needs to be contextualized. On one hand, male participants are much less articulate than female participants about gender inequalities, which, after all, is not an especially surprising finding. On the other hand, while these processes are clearly pointed out when discussing early school abandonment (which was an undesired outcome for both male and female participants), it is not articulated at all in relation to different gendered curriculums. Regarding different content learning, both male and female participants generally recall their experiences as being positive in gendered school activities and do not indicate any reconsideration of their opinion about the curriculum and its impact on promoting gender disparities (Example 3). [33]

This last observation should be put in historical context, which brings us to discuss some of the socio-historical constraints that have affected the developmental trajectories of our participants. The first point relates to the net consequences of schooling. As suggested above, the potentially problematic effects of such brief contact with formal education are somewhat mitigated by the availability of sanctioned and stable adult roles in the community, which are only

partially tied to academic credentials and skills. Most participants come from and have worked in rural environments in occupations closely tied to farming or agriculture (and housekeeping in the case of women). In practice, schools already made provisions for this and incorporated these roles into their curriculum (Example 3). Further, even when participants consider that they did not acquire or appreciate sufficiently the most basic academic skills provided by schools (literacy and numeracy), they report alternative paths through which these have been expanded in rural out-of-school contexts and community roles (Examples 4 and 5). The later can be seen as part of the broad stance that participants provide as "oriented towards culture and learning," and that what we have argued is directly related to the intergenerational configurations and educational histories of the families of our participants—as described in the method section. [34]

Finally, the stories of how participants entered and left school also show a potential change in how education is conceived in itself in relation to the child. Supposedly, in contemporary times (in Western industrialized societies) education is seen as an individual right of the child, guaranteed by the state and, on occasions, independent from the wishes of the minor and her or his family. In contrast, in the case of our narratives, decisions about schooling are clearly collective and take into consideration external constraints, family needs and even decisions regarding which offspring will be able to continue their schooling and which will not. [35]

In conclusion, the narratives we have collected provide a rich account about schooling in Spain's later half of the twentieth century. This information is no doubt potentially relevant for historical studies of education. Yet, the narratives also provide information on the life-trajectories of our participants, the place school had in their life, and the role that education and "schooled culture" played in their past and present identities. [36]

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