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Emancipatory Education and Youth Engagement in Brazil: A Case Study Bridging the Theory and Practice of Education for Social Transformation

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Received: 25 November 2018; Accepted: 22 January 2019; Published: 24 January 2019



Abstract: Actualizing education beyond the scope of traditional schooling and incorporating elements of critical pedagogy and social transformation are essential for efforts aiming to reduce inequalities and enhance the livelihoods of excluded populations. This article examines emancipatory education through a Freirean lens by considering its dimensions of critical pedagogy, both in practice and in theory. Drawing from a case study of an NGO-led initiative enabling hundreds of young people from the favelas of Rio de Janeiro to formulate and implement their own ideas for social action, the article examines the links between the program's objectives and practices and the aspects of the negotiated curriculum, problem-posing education, dialogical learning, and praxis that form the theoretical underpinnings of emancipatory education. The case study findings, which highlight the stages of the educational program, reveal how young people are empowered to challenge prevailing environments of exclusion and advance practices of positive community social regeneration. The study, thus, provides evidence of a form of education for social transformation (EST) which can contribute meaningfully to a peaceful struggle for social change while simultaneously redefining and humanizing education as a practice of emancipation.

Keywords: emancipatory education; critical pedagogy; Paulo Freire; favelas; social transformation; youth empowerment

1. Introduction

Education is widely perceived as the key to a better life. Undoubtedly, obtaining degrees and competencies through formal education systems, in order to compete in an ever-demanding knowledge-based society, directly influences multiple aspects of one's social, economic, and political life. Yet, traditional schooling does not necessarily lead to critical understanding of oneself and the world as a whole. In contemporary societies shaped by neoliberalism, global market forces have played an increasingly stronger role in shaping educational systems that influence the formation of students' identities and values [1]. Consequently, the more that schools focus on "one-size fits all" curricula, designed to prepare individuals for competitive global market forces, the more people tend to become detached from local needs, knowledge, and culture. Education that limits exposure to critical content about social, economic, and political contradictions likewise hinders people's ability to challenge the hegemonic arrangements that reinforce structural injustices [2,3]. Hence, if education is to help uplift largely excluded populations, for it to be truly liberating, it must prepare individuals for a self-managed, self-reflective, and self-active life [4].

For the renowned Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, a pathway to individual and collective consciousness raising, and to the political and educational empowerment of marginalized groups, is embodied in *emancipatory education*, which entails critical analysis of people's social conditions [5,6]. Conceiving education as cultural interaction between educators and students by means of dialogue and

the co-production of knowledge, Freire regarded emancipatory education as a method to effectively address the deep-seated needs of local people and the communities in which they live. In contrast to mainstream educational systems that are often seen as reinforcing structures of oppression and existential violence, a principal goal of emancipatory education is to celebrate marginalized social spaces and to foster counter-hegemonic discourses that generate actions of liberation and progressive change [7–9]. Starting on the basis of the knowledge that individuals bring with them to learning spaces [9,10], emancipatory education promotes pedagogical practices that stimulate individuals to think critically and to subsequently resist social and structural inequalities, with the aim of transforming their lives and communities [11–13]. The means whereby emancipatory education achieves this disruptive purpose is through critical pedagogy which, through learner-centered inquiry and dialogue, problematizes the cultural, political, and economic power mechanisms that are integral to the discourses of everyday life, such as popular culture, news media, and schooling [14,15].

There is, of course, no one single approach to conducting emancipatory education. Instead, stemming as it does from theories of hegemony, counter-hegemony, and grassroots mobilization, emancipatory education is open-ended and very much tied to the particularities of local context. As such, there is an ongoing impetus to “reinvent Freire” (as the man himself urged his readers to do) by exploring interventions that embrace emancipatory education principles and approaches, particularly in out-of-school contexts in low-income and otherwise disadvantaged social settings. This is very much the approach of a Brazilian youth-oriented nonformal education program that has been undertaken in Rio de Janeiro since 2011 by *Agência de Redes Para Juventud* (the Network for Youth Agency—hereby referred to as “the Agency”). Consisting of a series of scaffolded educational workshops specifically for youth living in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, the Agency program aims to stimulate young people’s reflections, ideas, and imagination upon which they can then, with guidance and material assistance, develop creative and entrepreneurial projects that will address specific needs within their own communities.

Drawing from the findings of a qualitative study of the Agency’s program, conducted over a five-year period (2012–2016), this article examines the opportunities, as well as the constraints, of applying elements of emancipatory education as an instrument for promoting individual and community transformation in marginalized communities. Field research for the study consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted with over fifty program stakeholders, mostly youth participants and program educators, but as well with several policy-makers and politicians working to improve the lives of youth in Rio de Janeiro and elsewhere in Brazil. Findings from interviews and focus groups were supported by a review of informational documents related to the program, including internal data on projects and participants, promotional publications, sponsor evaluation reports and social media sources, as well as occasional observations and informal conversations with current and former project participants over the five-year period. During the latter part of the research fieldwork, a survey of some 400 former program participants yielded descriptive statistics that helped to substantiate the qualitative findings. For more comprehensive information on the methodology of the study, including a full list of data sets, coding procedures, and conceptual maps of themes and meanings, see Melo (2018) [16].

2. Realizing the Potential of Favela Youth: The Agency Educational Program

In the over 750 favelas scattered across Rio de Janeiro, crime, violence, and the militarization of public security—coupled with entrenched socio-economic deprivation, chronic lack of social services, and a pervasive culture of marginalization—have long confined the majority of its 1.4 million residents to invisibility and intense social exclusion [17–19]. As a result, favela youth face serious structural barriers, such as immersion in endemic poverty, barriers to educational advancement, limited work and income opportunities, and lack of cultural affirmation. Black youth, in particular, are more likely to be out of school and unemployed, and are disproportionately affected by lethal violence and police brutality [20–23]. Rio de Janeiro’s military police force, which has been responsible for 8000 killings in

the past decade alone, routinely resort to racial profiling and extreme violence against favela dwellers, especially those who are young and black [24]. In this so-called “Marvelous City” (a popular sobriquet for Rio), the risk of male youths becoming victims of homicide is fourteen times higher than for other groups, and is three times higher for blacks overall [22].

Within this context, since 2011 the Agency has conducted a nonformal education program that has led to some 200 capacity-building projects involving low-educated and low-income youth, aged 14–29, living in 32 favelas. The central aim of the Agency’s program is to enable youth to critically reflect on their immediate socio-economic circumstances, and thereupon assist them in conceiving and developing small scale projects that foster progressive changes in their communities. In so doing, through this reflective action-oriented educational process, the program is designed to enable young participants to become protagonists of community-based social change. The educational forums of the program are generally held on Saturdays—the day of the week when youth are least occupied with work or family responsibilities—and range over periods of between two and four months. The program’s methodological approach consists of a series of sequential pedagogical stages for groups of youth, each of which cumulatively aims to cultivate their interests, exercise their analytical and critical thinking skills, and—drawing from their lived experiences and cultural identities—enable them to create projects with a potential for social impact. Unlike conventional vocational training programs, the Agency does not offer formal credentials that might potentially facilitate the employability of youth who complete the program. Instead, it encourages young people to conceptually challenge the unequal social dynamics of the urban environments in which they live, and to envision these environments not as sites of chronic disorder, but as localities with potential for imaginative possibilities and solutions. By helping to develop young people’s artistic, technical, and entrepreneurial competencies, that in many cases have led to the development and implementation of projects that address social problems that the youth themselves have analyzed, the program has also help to expand youth access to social networks and opportunities for socio-economic mobility that otherwise would have been denied to them. As one Agency staff member commented:

The favela used to be seen as a place of absolute negation, where nothing could be done, where no value was recognized. The Agency seeks to invert this logic and show the favela youth that that space offers fundamental elements for their projects. And, being as they are from the favela, they can indeed become creators in life and in the world, recognizing the territory from under the lens of the opportunities and potentiality it offers. [25] (p. 69)

In contexts where young people’s right to experimentation and freedom to choose is repressed by the structural boundaries of their social conditions, the Agency’s cycle of educational interventions (its stimulus cycle) aims to create learning opportunities outside the formal system of education and the everyday routines of the favelas. Through such opportunities, rather than being obliged to receive pre-packaged information, youth are encouraged to exercise their imagination and generate ideas that are substantive and meaningful for them. This is done through eight specific stages of the stimulus cycle [25,26].

2.1. The Stimulus Cycle

The compass stage: This first stage of the cycle consists of a visual endeavor, whereby youth are encouraged to develop their own ideas and depict them as directions of a compass on a large canvas. To the north, they are asked to describe an idea for a potential project they would be interested in seeing in their community, no matter how approximate or vague; to the south, either through writing or drawing, they are invited to reveal what led them to the idea, how it connects to their lived experiences, and what resources and abilities they consider would be needed to put their idea into practice; to the east, again through writing or drawing, they are encouraged articulate the forms of expression or activities necessary to ensure that the idea comes to fruition as a project; and to the west, they are asked to identify the potential locale of the project, and the people who will be affected by it.

The alphabet stage: In this second stage, youth are invited to further develop their ideas for the formulation of a project of their choice by writing words, each beginning with a letter in the alphabet (A to Z) that relates to their envisioned project. As far as possible, each word should describe a thought, an experience, or other external references such as people, objects, places, relationships, and personal aspirations that have inspired their artistic, recreational, and/or entrepreneurial aspirations and that may be used to further clarify how and in what form their project might be realized. Through this alphabetical word game, by referring to the spaces and experiences they are familiar with that hopefully can foster a clearer vision of their imagined projects, young people can begin to systematize their thoughts about themselves and the environments in which they are living.

The ideas fair: In this third pedagogical stage, young people are asked to discuss their initial project ideas with their peers and thereby identify and connect with other program participants who share similar interests, and might therefore be willing to collaborate on the further mutual development of their emerging project proposals. The name “fair” captures the essence of this stage—a dynamic exercise of public presentation and exchange of ideas with other youth. Through the articulation of their emerging project proposals, not only can youth elicit feedback from their peers, but in the search for partners to work with, they can learn the value of compromising and altering initial preferences when needed. Through the ideas fair, public peer presentations and dialogue are key steps towards the formation of group ties that are ultimately essential for the realization of proposed youth projects.

The mapping stage: In this fourth stage, having conceptualized a potential community-based project that they wish to develop, participants are encouraged to identify resources within their own communities that they can enlist for the further planning and realization of their projects. This reflective mapping exercise, which entails discussion with peers from their own as well as neighboring communities, helps to enable youth to attain not only information on the profiles, needs, and expectations of people who are in close proximity to them, but as well it heightens their awareness of inherent resources that may exist in their own neighborhoods, which they may hitherto have been unaware of and which can give further impetus to their project ideas.

The inventory stage: Building upon the mapping exercise, this fifth stage of the Agency nonformal education program encourages youth participants to survey and further identify, collect, and organize information about existing resources or experiences that may be relevant to the development of their project proposals. Through a creative process that can take the form of drawings, collages, pictures, artifacts, and testimonials, youth participants are stimulated to visualize community-based opportunities and partnerships with local actors such as community leaders, businesses and organizations that they might establish for the advancement of their project interests.

The presentation stage: This sixth pedagogical stage consists of brief oral presentations conducted by youth—sometimes individually, sometimes in groups—in which they demonstrate their acquired knowledge and present their project proposals to their peers using clear and convincing language. The aims of each presentation are to explain and justify the following: a) The project rationale, focusing on the needs that inspired the project idea and its potential community level contribution or impact; b) the proposed activities to be undertaken; and c) the abilities that project participants will need to possess or acquire. An important aspect of the presentation stage is that those who are presenting must work through key elements of their projects, and thereby prompt their audience peers to further reflect on and refine their own action proposals as they listen and ask questions.

The personification stage: This seventh stage aims to assist young people in assigning project roles and responsibilities for themselves. Through a process that combines elements of theatre, storytelling, and discussion of representative images, participants are encouraged to identify their principal project *personas* such as: The *project pioneer*, the *implementer*, the *collaborator*, the *beneficiary*, the *evaluator*, and the *member of the public at large*. Through this role-playing exercise, the personification stage encourages youth to organize and distribute tasks within their designated groups, with each member understanding his/her contribution and responsibilities, as well as the benefits that will result from the project. This stage likewise encourages youth to reflect on the different attitudes and behaviors of

people who are associated with their proposed projects and beyond, as well as to recognize the need for flexibility when working with others.

“A day in the life of my project”: This eighth (last) pedagogical stage consists of a day-long event during which the participants offer previews of their projects-in-action. For this event, youth are asked to prepare a detailed overview of what their project will entail, who will be responsible for different aspects of project implementation, and the results that are to be expected. The central purpose of this activity is to enable young people to build their confidence and credibility by publicly presenting their project proposals and demonstrating the community benefits that will result. In doing so, they gain initial experience in engaging their potential target audience and fostering public interest in accepting and eventually becoming involved in each of their projects as beneficiaries and participants.

Following these eight pedagogical stages, youth participants are invited to an annual event in Rio involving all Agency participants from past and current program cycles to meet each other, share innovative ideas with their peers, and network with representatives of organizations and other individuals of interest from elsewhere in Brazil and abroad. Following this event the participants are asked to submit their project proposals to a competition for funding. In this “pre-incubator” phase, each individual or project team presents their project with a detailed business plan and a public marketing strategy to be assessed by a three-person jury. Selected jury members are themselves involved in different domains of civic life as cultural producers, policy-makers, entrepreneurs, civil servants, social activists, and journalists. Together, they decide which projects will be awarded funding, thus enabling the recipients to embark on the implementation of their projects. Other youth who are not awarded funding nonetheless receive recommendations from the jury as to how they can garner support for their projects through other means.

For those projects that have been approved and have received funding for initial implementation, the Agency continues its support through the creation of “maps of opportunity” and the facilitation of social networking with people and organizations, sometimes within the favelas where projects will be located, and sometimes elsewhere in the city that may yield scholarships, internships, and job placements. In addition, Agency support in the early execution stages of each project consists of close monitoring and supervision so as to ensure positive initial outcomes and the necessary foundations for project sustainability after the termination of Agency support.

2.2. Linking Theory and Practice: The Agency Program as Emancipatory Education

The exercise of linking theoretical dimensions of emancipatory education to the pedagogical concepts and practice of a nonformal education is a daunting one. This is true not only because relatively open-ended curricula in out-of-school settings can prove difficult to fully describe, but also due to issues involving the complexity, scope, and actual practicality of education that aims to be emancipatory. With such constraints in mind, in this section I will show how the theory and practice underlying emancipatory education are incorporated within the Agency’s nonformal education program. In so doing, it is important to note that, although I link elements of theory and practice from the perspective of this case study, the intention is not to impose a single analytical framework upon the Agency’s nonformal education program or to suggest that specific stages of the program can only be connected to theoretical concepts that I describe here. In fact, much like the comparable layers of purpose and meaning that critical pedagogy gives rise to, the stages of the Agency’s pedagogical approach are interchangeable. They can be examined as stand-alone activities, as well as interconnected stages of a comprehensive educational intervention. Consequently, rather than an explanatory summation of emancipatory teaching and learning, what follows is an analysis of how theoretical concepts—which can frequently seem abstract and hard to instrumentalize—may be applied in real-world educational settings as foundations for change.

2.2.1. Linkage to a Negotiated Curriculum

Power and culture play a central role in knowledge production inside schools and in society at large. The ability of individuals to express their culture is directly tied to the power they possess and are able to exercise within the prevailing social order. For children and adolescents, schooling is a key institution of social order. As many studies have shown, however, the overt, as well as hidden, curricula of mainstream schools generally serve as instruments to legitimize and advance the worldviews and cultural values of dominant societal groups that have the effect of marginalizing the ways of living and knowing of colonized or marginalized social groups [27,28]. In this way, mainstream educational practices serve to reproduce the social and ideological discourses designed to maintain the subordination of marginalized and minority groups [2,29].

In countering this, critical pedagogy relates to a form of negotiated curriculum founded on the needs, life situations, and experiences of all learners. As a form of cultural politics, the purpose of a negotiated curriculum is to critically examine the prevailing precepts and features of culture (in its everyday formal and informal practices) and to investigate how historical patterns of power have shaped individual subjectivities and collective identities [11,30]. As part of this process, students are encouraged to “critically appropriate knowledge outside their immediate contexts in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live” [28] (p. 77). From this perspective of learning, they are therefore challenged to seek solutions to the problematic issues they face and thereupon take steps towards transformative action that will enhance their social, political, and economic realities [29,31].

This is very much aligned with the Agency’s pedagogical stages, which aim to enable youth to critically reflect on their proximate circumstances and the underlying structures that inhibit improvements to these circumstances. More significantly, through the processes of critical pedagogy—for example, in the *mapping* and *inventory* stages of the Agency program—participants are able to see beyond their individual selves and interests and connect their fears and hopes to the perspectives of other community members. By investigating the needs and expectations of favela residents in order to detect a suitable target population for their projects, they are led to critically examine the potential strengths and resources in their own neighborhoods that they might tap into, and through analysis and dialogue develop and articulate entrepreneurial ideas directed towards overcoming structural impediments.

The Agency stages also constitute a foundation upon which youth can recognize the significance of their own knowledge and lived experiences, thereby enabling them to take steps towards a rejection of the pervasive and thoroughly negative stereotypes of favela life. This, then, can lead to envisioning a sense of the constructive possibilities of their own agency. For example, Aline, whose project involved the production of a film featuring youth telling the life stories of local residents through music, explained that her educational experience with the Agency program had a profound impact on how she perceives her own neighborhood:

I didn’t feel like a resident of Batan. I used to hate the place where I live and didn’t have any kind of affection for it. I was ashamed, to be honest. As my project developed, I was able to create a bond with my community, and I started noticing that other residents felt the same way. I saw it in their eyes when they would watch our film and say things like: “Wow, I had no idea we had so much here.” So, we brought another perspective to a place that is often portrayed solely from the aspect of violence.

Both the *mapping* and *inventory* stages are components of a negotiated curriculum, in the sense that they are rooted in an individualized educational approach that, although directed towards project creation, is contextualized in (and stems from) the lifeworld experiences of favela youth. These experiences, in turn, allow them to create content and proposals that are relevant to their realities and that can ideally lead to transformations (however incremental and small) in their own lives and in their communities. A key differentiating factor of the Agency’s nonformal education program

that differentiates it from formal schooling is its focus on the needs and aspirations of the youth participants themselves. As Fernando, a favela funk artist who created a dance-and-music project to foster community reconciliation in rival neighborhoods, points out:

In school, they just force you to do things; it is a method for the masses. And that is what I like about the Agency. They get to know you before they teach you anything, and they prepare you to do whatever it is that you want to do . . . It is a more effective teaching method, I think . . . They also encourage you to do things instead of just teaching.

As students grow increasingly accustomed to the teaching methods they are being introduced to, they can begin to critically reflect on how different social issues close at hand are significant in their lives, and how they are manifested. This is the essence of a negotiated curriculum; it consists of context-relevant educational content that is applicable to—and draws directly from—the environments of young people in the favelas. This type of contextualized and person-centered educational approach is absent from mainstream school classrooms. As Elaine, who created a project that focused on enhancing local black culture, explained:

I understand the importance of formal schooling, but placing locks in the school gates so kids won't try to leave is not the way to do things. So, I think Agency helped change our minds in this sense . . . I still think that everyone needs to go to school, but they should not be obligated to do and say what the teacher wants . . . I think there should be more attention placed on individuals themselves, and the Agency works with this relevant content.

2.2.2. Linkage to Problem-Posing Education

The banking model of education, one of Freire's most widely recognized concepts, is a metaphor that speaks to the lack of critical practices in contemporary schools. As Freire argued, the banking model relegates students as being akin to 'empty containers' who must passively accept having teachers—regarded as the holders of knowledge—'deposit' predetermined information into them [5]. Through a fixed method of receiving, memorizing, and repeating information, students are expected to acquire standardized knowledge that is deemed to be valuable by others, rather than engaging in the educational process as self-developing learners. Suppressing individual subjectivity, banking education inhibits students' inherent ability to independently generate knowledge, solve problems, and reflect on practice—necessary steps to developing critical consciousness about the world around them [32,33].

In direct contrast to this banking approach, Freire advocated a self-reflective learning process that cultivates knowledge based on people's lived experiences and social history. Often framed as a problem-posing approach to education, it emphasizes the need for teachers and students to co-create knowledge through listening, dialogue, and action. As Freire observed, only in this way, on the basis of critical consciousness-raising, can individuals learn to envisage new situations and transform their lives [5]. Through problem-posing activities, students can analyze the "whys", "hows", and "whos" that influence and shape their surroundings and day-to-day lives [5]. The process involves: a) Identifying the topic to be analyzed; b) defining the problem; c) personalizing it; d) discussing its dimensions; and e) identifying ways to address it [34,35].

This reflective problem-posing process is central to the Agency's pedagogical approach. It is not concerned with the transmission of content per se, but rather with the development of young people as protagonists of change. Through its stimulus cycle the program promotes problem-posing education in three main ways. First, the different stages aim to expand the creative capacity of participants and help them to identify—and to think critically about—new aspects and possibilities in their own communities and everyday life experiences that they have hitherto not considered. Second, it promotes a non-authoritarian teaching approach based on mutual respect and learning, breaking with the traditional top-down relationship between teacher and students. In addition, participants are encouraged to engage actively and critically in all the stages, rather than simply consuming

information passively. Third, the Agency recognizes participants as creative agents who have the capacity to generate new ideas. This is not to say that the program presumes to become a turning point in the trajectory of participants within a fixed time frame. Instead, the goal is to demonstrate to young people that they have a right to imagine and try out new possibilities, and new ways of interacting in their own social surroundings.

Specifically, this is very much the approach that is adopted in the *compass* stage of the Agency's nonformal educational initiative. Through visual conceptualization of a project proposal in the form of a compass, participants present: a) An introduction of their overall idea, which relates to identification of the topic to be examined; b) a description of the motivation underlying the project idea, how it connects to the lived experiences of youth, what resources are needed, and what forms of expression will be employed (all encapsulated by the elements of "identifying and personalizing the problem"); and c) a description of the proposed project site and populations that will benefit from the project, which align with the problem-posing components of "creating a debate around the problem and identifying alternatives to solving it."

2.2.3. Linkage to Dialogical Learning

A problem-posing educational approach that rejects a banking model of knowledge creation and encourages students to become 'active investigators of society' is inherently related to critical pedagogy's concept of dialogical learning [36]. Based on the notion that individuals are created by, and in turn help to create, the social universe they are inserted in, critical dialogue involves a series of dialectic activities (e.g. questioning, responding, sharing experiences and perspectives, adapting, suggesting alternatives, and so on) that allow students to deeply analyze the contradictions in the social structures they live under and to connect their lives with those around them [30–32]. Such educational practices hold that students are active and conscious agents, capable of knowing and transforming their realities as they gain critical understanding of their surroundings [11,37].

The critical educator plays a crucial role in dialogical learning, working collaboratively with students in a non-authoritarian way that enables them to reflect on and solve problems about the nature of their social realities. This entails dialogue with students which must be guided by respect for the ideas they bring to the learning space [29,36,38,39]. In this dialogical process, while teachers help to unveil objective reality to students, it deliberately avoids transmitting 'correct knowledge' in a banking model approach. Rather, the act of engaging in critical dialogue constitutes the reflective basis of praxis and emancipation [40] (p. 173). In effect, dialogue is "the encounter between men, mediated by the word, in order to mediate the world" [5] (p. 88).

Working with students inside the classroom and in their communities, Freirean educators attempt to uncover the "ideas, words, conditions and habits that are central to their everyday life experiences" [11] (p. 31). These generative themes—the familiar words, experiences, situations, and relationships that are central to people's lives—are representative of the most important issues impacting students and their communities [11,39]. Similar to the mapping and inventory exercises, the Agency's *alphabet* stage also serves the purpose of helping youth become critical examiners of their communities, building an "epistemological relationship to reality" as Freire would put it [41] (p. 42). In constructing a list from A to Z that describes the knowledge, experiences, and references that have inspired their project ideas, participants in the Agency program actively learn to create their own generative themes.

The fact that the Agency arranges for participants to revisit and discuss these themes with other youth throughout the stimulus cycle exemplifies its emphasis on dialectic activities. The *ideas fair* and *presentations* stages, for instance, are exercises that encourage participants to share perspectives and reflections, ask and answer questions, make suggestions, and learn to adapt. Notably, in the annual event referred to above, participants are able to engage with other young people from across the city, discussing a broad range of themes of common interest and sharing their ideas for innovation and change. As Viviane, who has established a community poetry initiative centered on current political

issues impacting favela dwellers, has observed, the Agency's nonformal educational program has helped young people to develop a critical awareness of troubling political and social issues, in a context where such inquiries are usually discouraged.

The most important thing is to help the youth to think for themselves. And to do that, we need to deconstruct in order to reconstruct. The opportunities are few, but still, we have to learn to be critical in choosing which ones to take. We need an education of 'whys.' The initiatives that are most present are embedded in a mediocre model of education . . . They are not discussed with the youth beforehand. We want to choose now. It isn't about what you want to give me or what you think I need anymore.

Similar to problem-posing, the Agency's emphasis on dialogical learning has key theoretical underpinnings. For example, its open-ended curriculum that is intended to be relevant to the lifeworld of participants and to recognize them as protagonists and creators relates to the principle of "respect for students' language, voices, identities and values" in dialogic learning. Similarly, the Agency's non-authoritative educational approach employed throughout the stimulus cycle exemplifies the "co-creation of knowledge between teacher and students." Its alphabet exercise, which is meant to help students gain an understanding of their reality, is parallel to "the use of generative themes from the physical and social world." The pedagogical centrality of discussion about problems that favela residents must face on a daily basis, which in turns leads to the formulation of project proposals aiming to address these problems, is directly related to Freire's notion of "the use of dialogue and reflective practices that foment social action".

2.2.4. Linkage to Praxis

In emancipatory education, the process of critical consciousness-raising (Freire's notion of *conscientização*), followed by actions for progressive social change, is what Freire termed as *praxis* (or informed action). Essentially, praxis relates to the juxtaposition of critical reflection and action, with each dialectically enriching the other in pursuit of liberation [32,36,42]. Merging theory and practice, the goal of praxis is to bridge experience, understanding, and social action, thus enabling individuals to interact democratically in pursuit of progressive social change [37,42]. In Freire's view, in order to be truly emancipatory, education must be entrenched in a combination of dialogue and praxis, each stimulating and sustaining the other continuously [40]. For Freire, ideas and theory are useful primarily when adopted for purposeful action and societal transformation [38].

By scaffolding training, critical reflection, mentorship, and action, the Agency's nonformal education program is structured in order to guide participants through the creative process so they can bring forth their own proposals for change. Through knowledge creation, which emerges from the experiences and ideas of favela youth that are relevant to their struggles and those of their communities, the program seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and actual practices that serve a larger transformative purpose. This is very much the essence of praxis-oriented critical pedagogy. From the specific stages of the stimulus cycle to the broader processes of project proposal presentations and eventual project creation and implementation, each educational step introduced by the Agency is meant to be mutually complementary, providing young people with foundations for critical engagement, creative expression, and, ultimately, the making of social change.

By encouraging young participants to critically examine the social and political environment of Rio de Janeiro and to envision projects founded on the principle of social entrepreneurship, Agency educators play a key role in stimulating their protégés' self-confidence and sense of autonomy. Nevertheless, it is the participants themselves who define what they will do, how they will do it, with whom to work, and what public to target. It is they who assume responsibility for putting their ideas into practice. With participants encouraged by "the possibility of choice", backed by a strong support system of education and mentorship, this is the essence of the pedagogy of praxis. As an example, a few weeks into the stimulus cycle, after participants have identified specific problems

within their communities, they are asked to fill out a questionnaire entitled “strategic planning”. This invites them to think seriously about potential projects that might address such problems and about how they might bring these projects to fruition. Commenting on this process, Raquel, a young health worker, explained that it was during this exercise that she had the idea to create a project providing emotional support and professional development for teen mothers in her community. Six years later (at the time of the interview), not only had her project benefited many young mothers, but it had evolved into an accredited NGO. As she explained:

When I started at the Agency I didn't know what project I wanted to create; I only knew I wanted to help my community. Then, throughout the cycle, I started to build an idea. A few years back, I helped a friend of mine who got pregnant and went through some difficulties. Once the Agency started to ask me what I thought my community needed, I thought to myself 'as it happened to my friend, I see a lot of girls in the community who get pregnant and have no support'. And that is how I started this involvement with pregnant teens and immersed myself in the project.

From strategies promoting favela art and culture, women's empowerment, and youth conflict resolution, to projects responding to demands related to education, work, and transportation, Agency participants have made use of their knowledge of community needs and resources to advance development actions that are conducive to, and respectful of, favela contexts. Such conditionalities for project implementation would likely be difficult for actors from outside the favelas to fully grasp and assess. This approach to grassroots development is based on the conviction that no one is better positioned than favela dwellers themselves to identify what their communities need most. As Raquel pointed out in a book she has written about her experience at the Agency, “Many people bring ideas and actions to the favela, but those do not always reflect our needs” [43] (p. 13).

Naturally, as the program attracts participants from dozens of different communities and from all walks of life, the ideas and motivations behind the projects young people create are as diverse as their life experiences and personal interests. And yet, despite varying in focus, objectives and target audience, the roughly 200 original projects that have been initiated by the Agency's emancipatory educational approach all share characteristics of locally-generated innovation and the impetus for context-relevant transformation. Examples of such are: A project to expand motorcycle taxi options for young women, that is administered by young women in the favela of João XXIII; a traveling home theater that combines the showing of national films and post-film debates in the homes of community residents in Batan; revitalization of an illegal garbage site through a planting and gardening initiative for children; and a community newspaper, dedicated to the strengthening of Northeastern culture by highlighting positive resident narratives in the favela of Rocinha. These are four projects typifying the imaginative initiatives for social impact that have emerged from the Agency's nonformal education program in Rio de Janeiro.

As for impact, despite being small-scale and running on limited funding, little over one-third of all projects created through and funded by the Agency are still active today, and one-quarter have been formalized as small businesses, increasing their relevance in their respective communities and helping build local capacity. In all, the extent to which these strategies have reached residents from different favelas (hundreds of people impacted by these projects), the diverse populations that have benefited (children, adult learners, job seekers, local artists, businesses, and so on), and the various institutions and organizations that have served as venues for these actions (from public schools and community centers to improvised auditoriums and residents' own homes), taken together, illustrate the potential of young people's ideas and actions, when focused on local challenges and opportunities, to help build stronger communities.

3. The Possibilities and Limitations of Critical Pedagogy in the Struggle for Social Transformation

Inside and outside academia, efforts to rethink education beyond the norms of traditional schooling have generated growing interest in the notion of education for social transformation, exemplified by learning for critical engagement, active citizenship, and social change. In this article, I have examined the stages and activities of a nonformal youth education program nested in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, highlighting, in particular, the pedagogical dimensions of its Freirean (emancipatory) approach to education. As research fieldwork for the study revealed, the Agency's emancipatory educational approach has enhanced the capabilities of youth to engage in local development processes through reflection and dialogue rooted in their own experiences and subsequent innovative actions. Three over-riding aspects of the Agency's methodology have been essential for this process.

The first involves starting out by situating young participants as potential agents of community transformation. By approaching young people as change makers, rather than as mere passive objects of social action, the Agency program has strengthened the inherent capabilities of young people to carry out initiatives that place them at the heart of development processes in the favelas where they live. The result has been an assembly of diverse projects which, despite their small scope and limited resource bases, have nonetheless managed to reach hundreds of favela inhabitants living and working in different spheres of activity. The dozens of localized actions created by these young people are not only tangible examples of youth-led responses to community challenges, but also represent possibilities of community social regeneration that help to counter dominant—and usually highly erroneous—discourses of “moral panic” that characterize youth as threats to societal stability and to the precariousness of life in the favelas. Projects developed through this bottom-up approach have helped to shed light on the all-too-hidden strengths and resources that exist in favelas and the innovativeness that young people can exhibit when there is adequate support for them. As the Agency program has shown, when young people living in the favelas are offered meaningful education that taps into their talents, it can enable them to contribute to the erosion of social barriers in a city that remains deeply divided by symbolic (as well as geographical) boundaries [44].

The Agency's bottom-up approach to community development points to its second dimension of contextualized learning and praxis. The educational stages and activities applied in the program help to integrate the interests, realities, and demands of participants, creating dynamic and interactive forums that attract young people to engage in learning as active subjects, rather than as passive objects. By relating education to the life-worlds of young people and by respecting their dispositions and abilities, the Agency has been able to stimulate participants to develop context-sensitive initiatives that draw upon elements of their own social and physical worlds and that relate to community conditions, resources, and day-to-day practices.

The third general feature of the Agency's emancipatory education program has to do with the adoption of an educational model based on reflective practices and critical dialogue. The Agency's teaching and learning methodology has stimulated participants to think critically about their places in the world, their living conditions, and the problematic issues and generally false discourses that outsiders have of their communities. This process of critical thinking has, thus, heightened young people's social and political consciousness, which can serve as the basis for subsequent community activism. As such, not only are they able to identify, describe, personalize, and debate these issues, but they can also create solutions to address them.

The Agency program, however, is not without its challenges. It must contend with an unfavorable political scenario, financial constraints, and occasional disconnectedness between older and younger participants, which can negatively impact classroom dynamics. Within the favelas where the program is offered, periodical outbreaks of violence can seriously disrupt the pedagogical stages of the program. Likewise, participation of many youth may be sporadic, due to immediate life pressures (such as caring for family members or working long hours to help sustain their households). For these and myriad other reasons, as an incremental strategy of consciousness-raising and social change, there

is no guarantee that outcomes from the Agency's educational program will be long-lasting. Indeed, while much of the Agency program's appeal lies in its open-ended and creative curriculum, and its emancipatory pedagogical methodology delivered by educators who are themselves mostly favela inhabitants, the Agency has nonetheless depended heavily on the dynamic leadership of its founder (the writer, director, and filmmaker, Marcus Faustini.), and on the financial and material support of several NGOs and private sector companies. Its long-term sustainability as a force for progressive change is, therefore, moot.

It is also important to note the tensions that tend to become manifest when the notion of emancipatory education serves as the theoretical basis of an educational program that is put into practice. Notably, the absence of other dimensions beyond class into an analysis of oppression, an oversimplification of individuals into categories of oppressor and oppressed (which can be read as a complete lack of agency for the later), and an over-dependence on the educator—and the process of emancipatory learning itself—to open doors for emancipation are examples of genuine concerns, which anyone interested in studying or applying Freire's pedagogy of liberation should take notice of and carefully consider [45,46]. Furthermore, as complex, multi-faceted, and non-linear processes, it is difficult to capture and assess progress in aspects of empowerment and emancipation in different life domains, meaning that accounts of change (and what they represent) must always come from those who experience these processes first-hand [47].

In all, however, despite its shortcomings, emancipatory education remains a dynamic and relevant basis of movement towards social justice and equity. In Brazil especially, as anti-leftist sentiment grows and the country enters a new era of conservatism following the recent election of a far-right President—who has proclaimed, among other statements, the value of torture and military-style leadership, and whose proposals to curb violence and crime include harsher penalties and the relaxation of gun ownership regulations—Freire's educational philosophy remains supremely relevant. Although the applicability of emancipatory education is highly dependent on a variety of factors such as context, leadership, and resources, the experience of the Agency's educational program in Rio de Janeiro offers useful insights for the practice of emancipatory education in other impoverished and violence-plagued urban communities in Latin America and elsewhere in the world. Along these lines, further research regarding the dynamics of youth-led community action is needed, focusing specifically on understanding how such localized bottom-up educational practices can take shape, the ways in which they galvanize youth and bring hope to the places where young people live, and how they can have a sustainable impact on community life.

Ultimately, in Brazil and beyond, a Freirean-inspired perspective of critical pedagogy can help us to regard emancipatory education as increasingly normative. By examining the personal experiences of participants and the impact of educational activities that foster critical insights among youth and their potential abilities as agents of progressive social change, researchers can demonstrate that the theoretical premises underlying transformative pedagogical initiatives can translate into highly effective practices. As Freire believed, education as praxis should not be consigned to wishful thinking, but rather should be recognized as a central tenet of peaceful historical struggle [6]. Inspired by this principle, within the framework of education for social transformation (EST), educators, policy-makers, and researchers should continue to demonstrate the heightened societal relevance of emancipatory education, in both theory and practice.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interests.

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