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Poor Youth and the Public School System: Challenges to Citizenship

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This study reflects about an intervention-research based on the demands presented by the Municipal Public School of Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Grounded on the theoretical-methodological principles of Community Social Psychology, we analyzed the complex relation between youth, school and citizenship, with emphasis on the analysis of the dynamic of prejudices of gender, race, class, territory and sexuality. We called this analytical exercise the mapping of the wealth and difficulties of the school. We thus carried out participant observation in the school, semi-structured interviews with the directors and pedagogical coordinators, discussion groups with the students, teachers and familiars. The map afforded knowledge of the set of notions related to the conceptions of what it is to be a student, to be young in the suburbs, the role of the school, the role of the teachers in education, and what perspective of participating in the daily school life is possible for the various actors that are part of the school community.

En este trabajo presentamos reflexiones acerca de una investigación-intervención basada en demandas presentadas por una Escuela Publica Municipal en Belo Horizonte, Brasil. A partir de los principios teórico-metodológicos de la Psicología Social Comunitaria, analizamos la compleja relación entre juventud, escuela y ciudadanía, con énfasis en la dinámica de los prejuicios de género, raza, clase, territorio y sexualidad. Llamamos este ejercicio analítico de mapa de las riquezas y dificultades de la escuela. Para eso, realizamos observación-participante, entrevistas no-estructuradas con los directores y coordinadores pedagógicos, grupos de discusión con estudiantes, profesores y familiares. El mapa de la escuela permitió conocer y analizar el conjunto de concepciones acerca de lo que es ser alumno, joven en la periferia, el rol de la escuela y de los profesores y cual la perspectiva de participación es posible para los diversos actores que integran la comunidad de la escuela.

Mots-clés :

Resumo

Neste trabalho apresentamos reflexões sobre uma pesquisa-intervenção baseada nas demandas apresentadas por uma Escola Pública Municipal em Belo Horizonte, Brasil. A partir dos princípios teórico-metodológicos da Psicologia Social Comunitária, analisamos a complexa relação entre juventude, escola e cidadania, com ênfase na dinâmica dos preconceitos de gênero, raça, classe, território e sexualidade. Chamamos esse exercício

analítico de mapa das riquezas e dificuldades da escola. Para isso realizamos observação participante, entrevistas não estruturadas com diretos e coordenadores pedagógicos, grupos de discussão com estudantes, professores e familiares. O mapa da escola permitiu conhecer e analisar o conjunto de concepções sobre o que é ser aluno, jovem da periferia, o papel da escola e dos professores e qual a perspectiva de participação é Possível para os diversos atores que integram a comunidade escolar.

***Palavras-chave**:*

Psicologia Social Comunitária, cidadania, educação, juventude, pesquisa-intervenção

The challenges for the development and promotion of citizenship in our society are numerous, especially if we consider that many approaches of social inequality, which is marked by economic, political, and cultural complexities, mainly adopt an economicist focus in the attempt to explain and the search for ways to deal with it. As asserted by Souza (2006), the fetishism of the economy on which the liberal society is anchored prevents us from seeing the action of the ideological and repressive mechanisms that culturally support the inequalities, seeking to create a consensus of hierarchies and subjection among individuals, groups, and classes as inevitable. If any kind of transformation can be envisaged, it is outside the sphere of the individual effort, and, thus, the accomplishment of the principle of meritocracy (Mayorga, Pereira & Rasera, 2009). This reductionism is established as a natural truth, out of a historical context and without considering the dynamic of power relations. The issue of social inequalities is recurrently considered as a question of economic deprivation, leaving the solution of this situation to the individual will and effort, which, as previously said, occurs though the denial of the historicity of the social relations and of the power relations (Mayorga & Prado, 2010). This dynamic of naturalization of the social inequalities can be observed in various spheres of our society. In this work, we took the public school and its relation with poor youth as an object of investigation.

This study presents reflections based on the project of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Brazil called *Citizenship in Action*, whose first activities started as curricular internship of the Psychology course of UFMG. Grounded on the theoretical-methodological principles of Community Social Psychology, the project was developed based on three core perspectives: theoretical and analytical positions that reject the individualized and psychologizing look of the school for the analysis of the context and of the social relations in the school framework; theoretical and conceptual positions that have sought to critically understand the complex relation between youth, school and citizenship, with emphasis on the analysis of the dynamic of prejudices of gender, race, class, territory, sexuality, and others; and the demands presented by the Municipal Public School of the City of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais State, Brazil, where the intervention-research is carried out and on which the reflections of this paper are based.

It is necessary to mention that this institution is located in the surroundings of a slum and that its clientele is nearly exclusively made up of slum dwellers, most of whom are black.

The *Citizenship in Action* project was started in the first semester of 2009[i]. In the initial contacts, the school directors and coordinators expressed three main concerns: 1) the students give great importance to the school space, although it does not necessarily mean an interest for classroom activities; 2) some teachers stated that they had difficulties in their relationships with the students, who are from the suburbs and have cultural experiences that are quite different from their own; 3) sexuality is at the core of the lives of the youths and the school and the teachers have difficulty dealing with this issue.

After this initial contact, the Project team[ii] prepared an intervention-research proposal organized in two stages: 1) mapping of the relationships between the various school actors (students, teachers, board of directors, students' relatives, staff members, and projects carried out in the school) and 2) planning and intervention over some of these actors based on the conclusions drawn from the map. The objective of the proposal in these two stages was to afford a space for dialogue, debate, and promotion of citizenship, with special attention to the racial, generational, sex, territory, class, sexual diversity issues associated with the background of suburban youths, together with the directors, teachers, staff members, and students of the second and third grades of the Municipal School.

Citizenship as strengthening of the school political community

Considering the Latin American social context, community social psychology rose from the dissatisfaction with the individualizing and pretentiously neutral approaches in social psychology (Martin-Baró, 1997; Montero, 2004). It is known that the socio-psychological and psychological thought that appeared in Latin America in the mid 20th century did not meet the needs of the developing social context of the various Latin countries anymore, because this thought reflected an imitation of the science produced in the industrialized societies (Sandoval, 2000). Trends were the criterion of importation rather than the relevance of the theories and practices for the Latin American realities. What was observed as an effect of this colonial thought was the incapacity of the social and human sciences to get closer to the poverty, the misery, the violence, the oppression, and the marginalization of various social groups, thus producing ineffective knowledge and practices that touched the problems experienced by the Latin American societies only with the bias of disqualification. In opposition to the individualizing and psychologizing approaches and fully in tune with the liberal model of society, community social psychology refused to analyze the inequalities (of class, gender, race, territory, sexual orientation) with the bias of individual differences or centered on the individual. Thus, explanations on the differences that point to the issue to be transformed in the individuals and their cultural, cognitive, moral, intellectual, and other shortcomings have been rejected. Community psychology also seeks to analyze the inequalities through the articulation of the redistributive dimensions and the dimensions

of recognition, without substituting one for the other (Fraser, 1995). This can be translated, for example, into the understanding of the slum problems based on economic and material elements, but also based on a set of shared notions on black people, the poor, women, slum residents that seek to justify the relationships of inequality, constituting a circle that feeds back to the naturalization and the social and historical decontextualization of society. We believe that the postures of neutrality end up by contributing to the maintenance of the status quo (Martin-Baró, 1997), and that, in response, the proposal of social psychology is to produce psychological knowledge associated with its praxis, concerned with the possibilities of constructing an emancipatory practice (Freire, 1975; Mayorga, 2007).

Therefore, it was in the developing world that the community social psychology found fertile soil for the production of theoretical and practical knowledge that was more adequate to the social realities of the Latin American countries (Sandoval, 2000). For such, its social productions and practices that Sandoval takes into consideration the colonial rationale that marks the constitution of these societies, characterized by a position that seeks to make a commitment with the social minorities and contribute to raising awareness and social mobilization. Being a psychology of action for transformation (Montero, 2004), it seeks to contribute with an emancipating posture, of which one of the products is the transformation of a given reality by the subjects immersed in situations of inequality. Thus, the project analyzed here has the principles of Community Psychology as a reference and is based on a psychosocial perspective that seeks social transformation, in our case, the democratization of relationships in the school through the participation of the subjects who experience situations of exclusion and violence, avoiding their victimization and taking them as social actors, fundamental constructors of their own reality (Montero, 2004).

Based on these theoretical propositions and considering the first concerns expressed by the school directors and coordinators, our effort was to articulate such principles with the specific context that we contemplated for our action: the school context. How can community social psychology be practiced in the school? What is its role? What could the contribution of the project be towards achieving some transformation in the school context? These questions lead us to ask about the role of the school in dealing with social inequalities and seek to understand the relationship between youths and the school through literature review and also by project field work in the daily school life and by acknowledging the importance that this institution has in the construction and promotion of citizenship (Abramovay et. al., 2005; Abramovay, 2006; Abramovay & Castro, 2006; Abramovay, Castro & Silva, 2004; Abramovay & Rua, 2003; Castro & Aquino, 2008; Santos, 2001; Spósito, 2005).

Citizenship has been an object of recurrent debate associated with the school space; however, what one perceives is that the problems have not been formulated within the field of psychology. As a result, the debates do not innovate and do not break away from the traditional understanding of citizenship. To understand it as a political strategy (Dagnino, 1994) and as a means of participating in the politics of the community (Mouffe, 1995), articulated with some of the principles of community social psychology,

allows us to make an approach of its conception that is more psychosocial than legal and that aims at contributing critically to the approach of this theme in the field of social psychology. For these authors, this reflection exercise allows one to draw away from the traditional perspective of citizenship, which is understood as a set of rights and duties that subjects have in society, "related to the idea of a status, of a juridical-legal position before the State" (Monteiro & Castro, 2008: 274). According to these authors, this traditional perspective is based on the classical division proposed by Marshall: civil right (right of individual freedom), political right (right to participate in the exercise of the political power), and social right (right of education, safety and health), which is characterized by universality, impartiality, rationality and non-historicization when the rights are considered as natural, without a temporal connotation.

Different from the perspective of rights and duties, the understanding of citizenship as a political strategy (Dagnino, 1994) is based on the principle that this notion is historical and temporal and cannot be considered universal, as it is constructed by the social actors in political fights. Therefore, it is the fruit of interests and concrete criteria defined by social groups in a given society and historical moment. Citizenship is then considered as being partial, under constant negotiation in the political field, as it organizes a strategy of democratic construction, of social transformation, that asserts a constitutive link between the cultural and political dimensions. Incorporating characteristics of contemporary society, such as the role of subjectivities, the emergence of a new type of social subjects and rights, the widening of the political space, this strategy acknowledges and emphasizes the intrinsic and constitutive character of the cultural transformation for democratic construction (Dagnino, 1994: 104)

According to the author, six points characterize this conception, distinguishing it from the previous one: 1. it is based on the argument of the right to have rights (Arendt, 1972); 2. it acknowledges the social subjects as being active and as definers of what they consider to be their rights and who fight for their formal recognition; 3. it constitutes a proposal of sociability; 4. it gets over the notion that formal recognition by the State ends the fight for citizenship; 5. it is structured based on the right of the actors to participate effectively on the definition of this system itself, of the invention of a new society; and lastly, 6. it includes the notions of both equality and difference.

We consider that to achieve the proposed project objectives it would be necessary to overcome the idea of citizenship as the acquisition of legal rights through the State, extemporal, abstract, and universal rights, and substitute it with a notion of citizenship constructed "bottom-up", that includes the "invention/creation of new rights which emerge from specific fights and from their concrete practice" (Dagnino, 1994: 108). This conception is only possible when the social subjects come to be understood as active subjects, as actors who define what they consider their rights to be in the fight for recognition. With social transformation in view, among other things, this notion of citizenship presupposes the construction of new forms of sociability that redimension the relationships between the various subjects involved in this context. To be able to incorporate both the difference and the equality thus affords a "more egalitarian

drawing of the social relations in all their levels and not only the incorporation of the political system in its strict sense" (Dagnino, 1994: 107). This diachronic perspective of construction of citizenship can be understood as a form of participation in the political community (Mouffe, 1995). Based on individual freedom and on equality of conditions of participation, the political community constitutes a space of expression of multiple demands in which the "we" is constituted around a public demand. What stands out in this conception, therefore, is the aspect of the political fight.

A fair school (Dubet, 2004) can be understood as that which allows the construction of dialogical spaces by its actors, the exchange of experiences, participation in the directions of education, and the production of political strategies to ensure access to social rights. According to the author, the widening of the right of education aimed at breaking away from the social inequalities based on the privileges of family origin and allowed individuals to construct new places in the social structure. However, instead of creating mechanisms of homogenization of access to knowledge, school has become a reproducer of social privileges inherited by the family, producing a game of domination of social values (Bourdieu, 2002). By giving precedence to meritocracy as one of its pillars, school has become an active agent of the production of distance between the popular and the erudite classes, thus guaranteeing social privileges within contemporary societies.

In the Brazilian social context, the expansion of schooling to the popular classes was followed by a public school crisis, which became evident in the chronic incapacity of guaranteeing quality education to the Brazilian population (Patto, 1992). The democratization of school for the Brazilian structural rabbles (Souza, 2009) was followed by a lack of public investment in public education, which drove the appearance of private schools and the maintenance of the dynamic of access to social privileges. However, as pointed out by a recent study on participation and democracy in school (Castro, 2010), public school offers the most possibility of construction of emancipatory practices amidst its students, within its social and political history and its managerial-technical organization. Taking into account the school context as a space maintained by hierarchies, the horizon is more favorable to public schools regarding participation and democracy in school.

The analysis and reflection on the school where we conducted the *Citizenship in Action* project helped us understand that in this perspective the school should be a privileged space of construction of this democratic sociability, inviting and making the active participation of the various actors in the continuous construction of the school possible. We managed to clearly define our role in this interaction – to facilitate and collaborate towards the manifestation of this practice in the very disturbed daily life of this public school located near a slum.

Relations and actions

Based on the demands presented by the school directors and coordinators and the impressions given by the immersion of the project team in the school environment, we sought to identify and analyze the processes occurring in that institution which made the promotion of citizenship easier or more difficult. We called this analytical exercise the mapping of the wealth and difficulties of the school. The mapping notion can also be understood as an analysis of social grammar (Souza, 2006), from which it is possible to grasp the elements and phenomena of a certain social reality. Based on the preliminary investigation of some social phenomena and relations observed in the school, together with the school actors, we analyzed the actions that could enable the promotion of citizenship and its production through the daily school life, in opposition to the idea of the construction of citizenship as an isolated task. Mapping the school also meant seeking to develop a relationship of familiarization with the daily school life, and, for that, it was necessary to listen to the various voices, versions, and experiences relating to the school, its problems, and its wealth. As outsiders, we could and should contribute to the production of a certain discomfort in relation to some dynamic that is seen as so natural and crystallized, the main one being the idea that any efforts were pointless, because the school, the students, the teachers, and the families “were just like that.” In the mapping, we were interested in identifying not only the school actors and their voices, but also the places where they spoke from, the places of power, the social hierarchies, as well as their possible ruptures and the porosity to this dynamic, apparently so crystallized.

With these reflections, we started the field activity paying attention to the rationale of the prejudice of color, race, sex, class, sexual diversity, and territory. As we consider that prejudice contributes to the conflicts between actors (Heller, 1984), which ends up contributing to the production of discourses of legitimizing of some and of delegitimizing of others, both in relation to the right of social participation and the construction of the world and the possibilities of voice. This is the reason of the importance of the *Citizenship in Action* project,which aims to contribute to the creation and strengthening of the dialogue spaces among the various actors of the school under investigation so that they could recurrently meet and interact with each, which had been prevented by stereotypes that maintained prejudices and gave rise to places of subordination, impeding change to be seen as a concrete possibility. Based on an interactionist perspective of science and production of knowledge, we sought to provoke the displacement of the subjects from their places of object, in relation to the institutional and social rationale, to places of actors. The interactionist view of science is based on the principle that the knowledge produced is the fruit of the interaction between external and internal agents, the role of the former being to facilitate and cooperate in the production of knowledge (Mayorga & Nascimento, 2009). To this end, we resorted to dialogical methodological procedures and joint action with the objective of observing, describing, and comprehending the school from the viewpoint of their actors. In this sense, the exercise was that of understanding a certain social reality and relating it to

the broader social, cultural, and historical context. We thus carried out participant observation in various spaces in the school, semi-structured interviews with the directors and pedagogical coordinators, discussion groups with the students, teachers, staff members, familiars, and project representatives.

The school map afforded knowledge of the set of notions and representations that the various actors of the school shared with each other and the social places constructed based on them. These notions are related to the conceptions of what it is to be a student, to be young in the suburbs, the role of the school, the role of the teachers in education, and what perspective of participating in the daily school life is possible for the various actors that are part of the school community. We must point out that the map drawn is dynamic, historically located and is not intended to be, in any way, the last word on the inclusion/exclusion dynamic in the school, the school problems and its wealth. Our look at and interpretation of the school dynamic takes into consideration the construction of spaces of debate with the actors of this institution so that it could be confronted, modified and criticized. The interest in dialoguing with the school actors starting from the map production was grounded on the epistemological principles that guided our work and also in response to some specificity of the phenomena with which we were dealing: problems without a name, made invisible by complex processes of the social dynamic (Mayorga, Ziller, Magalhães & Silva, 2010). The silencing is not constructed suddenly and thus requires an analytical and methodological effort to promote denaturalization. In this perspective, *Dialoguing with non-existences* can be seen as a methodological aspect, and our position was presenting it for debate with the other actors of the school, making ourselves an object of reflection.

From the creation of the spaces of debate on the map with the various actors of the school, some activities were employed to create new spaces and also to potentiate certain practices that already existed for the promotion of citizenship and democratic participation in the school environment. Our objective thus was that the other school actors felt themselves mobilized to plan and perform actions and that our role was one of mediation and collaboration to the process proposed.

Youth, prejudice, and citizenship

The school map revealed various problems that were unnamed in the school environment and also some wealth shared in this space of creation of “a sociality concerned with the differences between individuals and ruled by cultural codes” (Castro, 2010: 17). Real experiences of participation in social life can be constructed in the school; nevertheless, the places socially constructed for the students in the school environments can impose a certain model of citizenship. Our objective then was to discuss these places constructed for the students based on the school mapping done. We will analyze how the shared conceptions about students, youths, and suburb residents, as well as certain places of subordination for the students in contact with other school actors; important elements for us to understand the dynamic of inclusion/exclusion in Brazilian society.

The experiences of youths in the contemporary world can be thought of as being crossed by a generational hierarchy, and the relationship between the generations as being marked by games of manipulation and power (Bourdieu, 2002). The school being part of society, it reproduces the subordination of youths to adults. Learning about the intergenerational dynamic shows to be a fundamental element in the perception of the relations of exclusion and inclusion in place in our society, and consequently, in the school space (Castro, 2008). Thus, students are inserted in a rationale centered on the adult, in which the adult is the main reference of society, and youths are left in a position of subordination and delegitimization in power relations when they are considered as irresponsible, immature, and incapable of representing their own interests. Such conceptions are also present in other spheres of society and have justified practices of violence, exploitation, and abuse of youths (Mayorga, 2006). In this situation, these students end up by being subjected to guardianship, caring and protective relationship, because they are considered incapable of demanding an explanation from the public world and of proposing new actions, as their experiences are disqualified.

Associated with the place of subordination produced within the generational dynamic that runs through our society, we also identified a disqualification of the experience of being a student. If the school is an institution that has the student as its focus of action, its major actor does not seem to be the student. Historically, the teacher has occupied the central place in the school environment, demanding for himself/herself the authorization of certain practices in the name of the fulfillment of the objectives of the school. Meanwhile, the authority of the student to participate democratically in the daily school life is made impossible by the view of the student as a subject that has less knowledge, or knowledge of lower value, thus creating a space of authoritarianism for the teachers within the school environment. It is this passage from authority to authoritarianism (Freire, 2000) that creates the centrality and the totalization of the place of the teacher in the school environment. The demand from the students for individual freedom in the school (Castro, 2010) is also ignored at the place created for them, subjects who do not have enough knowledge to support their interests.

To be a student and to be a young student can be seen from some positive senses, and many times, romanticized. However, with respect to the issues of the political, public, and social life and the issues of citizenship, the capacity of the young students is underestimated. Marked by identities that are seen as not ready yet (Santos, 2004) for the full exercise of the social and political life, they need to be “taught” how to participate. This conception of juvenile immaturity is used not only to justify the non-participation of the students in subjects relevant to school life, but also even influences the understanding of the role of the school and consequently, of what actions can take place in this space and how they must occur. The guardianship relationship towards the students is exerted by spending the energy that the school reserves for dealing with disciplinary issues, for example. The contact with this school revealed a daily life with rather busy actors, constantly moving, in permanent commotion. The directors, coordinators, teachers, and staff members were always "too busy" to take part in the activities proposed for the project. The school seemed to us to be an unavoidably

turbulent place.

However, when we observed the movement of these actors and the objective of the actions that occupied them, we realized that most of them aimed at the control, contention, disciplining, at “educating those students,” education here meaning “teaching good manners.” It also called our attention that an employee hired as a kitchen assistant was often invited to exert the extinct function of school disciplinarian. We must point out that this function was exercised despite the work overload of the cafeteria staff. The importance of discipline issues brings to mind a notion of the youth that crystallizes in the place of education itself, of a continuous preparation, within the perspective of developmental reason (Castro & Monteiro, 2008) in which the youth can still learn about elementary issues, as in the case of their "personality", "moral values", and even of social behavior, understood as “good manners”. In this environment, the youth is far from being considered as a political actor, as he or she is not recognized as having something to offer, even if they have good questions. The ongoing projects at the time of the intervention-research seemed to aim at filling in time so that the teachers could carry out a monthly meeting. This space beyond the scientific disciplines did not seem to be regarded as adequate for the debate of issues related to citizenship and social participation. The school actors shared the idea that the voices of the youths were just *noise* rather than discourse (Rancière, 1995), that instead of being considered legitimate in the debate of the main issues of the school, they had to be silenced, disciplined, and guarded. From our perspective, therefore, it would be important to ask what these noises could reveal about the school and the school dynamic. However, youths appear as subjects who are a nuisance and who are hushed. In this school, the subaltern does not have many spaces where he/she can be seen as a vocal subject (Spivak, 1988).

Associated with the places of subordination constructed from the generational dynamic and of possession of knowledge and authority in the school environment, we also point out the rationale of subordination that is produced from the territorial and social class issues. In the symbolic networks shared by the school actors, the slum contributes with some of the social representations of the students. Conceived mostly as occupying a place of need and of criminality (Valladares, 2005), the students are seen in reference to their place of origin, the slum, as lacking interest, needy, violent, without culture and morally inadequate. This is far from being a secondary element in the debate about the public school, particularly for those who cater for the public of the slum and urban agglomerations. Among the existing discourses and meanings constructed about the slum, the least known is that of the slum residents themselves (Cruz, 2007; Silva & Barbosa, 2005).

Therefore, the generational issue is not the only dimension that concurs to the delegitimizing of these students in their daily relationships, but also the way that these youths are restrained in cafeteria lines, in the elements used to refer to school failure, in the views of quarrels, fights, conflict that take place in a given school shift, in the understanding of the lack of respect in the relations. It constitutes a unidirectional vector of lack of respect, in the talks about violence in the school, which almost always

focused on the actions of the students in relation to the teachers. There is a the reduction of the understanding of violence in the background of the youths, a constant naturalized demarcation of these students to their social origin, and an absence of references to the social places of the directors, teachers, secretary, and the librarian Thus, it seems that only whoever learns has a social origin, only the family of the ones who learn belongs to society. As a result, the students who are young and live in the slum seem to contribute to making the exclusion dynamic more complex.

In the analysis of the interlocution between the subordination rationales previously made explicit, what stands out in the plotting of the school map is that the young students who live in the slum, that is, poor and black youths in their majority, have rather negative and stigmatized representations and conceptions of the various actors of the school. The idea that they are marginal, victims of an economic system, that they have no way out and that they tend to choose the path of crime is recurrent, which is the reason why they need close guarding, discipline, and watching over. This vision corroborates the notion of the students as even more intangible as a political actor, because there is preliminary work to be done, that of preventing a path of crime. In this way, the actions performed in the school are meant to reach beyond the classroom and also have a goal that is based on a control rationale and not on the drawing of utopias (Freire, 1975), on the possibility of collective construction of a common world.

The discourse of the various actors in the school reveals that what is sought in these actions is to occupy the youths in order to prevent idleness, which might then lead to crime. The place of origin of these students seems to determine “needs” of all sorts for the various actors of the school: cognitive, moral, psychological, intellectual, and affective. Furthermore, such needs are understood and explained in an intensely naturalized way, which, as we attempted to indicate in this work, ends up perpetuating the cycle of inequality.

The poor youths, conceived by their needs in so many spheres of life, represent individuals who "did not reach the status of agent or member of a social category and were only impregnated with the stigma of the social problem" (Castro, 2008, p.5). The poor students represent a problem that prevents education from taking place, being themselves a hindrance to the fulfillment of the school objectives. This is expressed in the daily complaints of the school actors about the students and their families: ideas that the students do not dedicate themselves to their studies, do not learn, that their families do not participate in the school life, are often explained and justified by their needs, which are nearly understood as being part of the nature and essence of these individuals. The role of the school within this perspective would be one of disciplining and normalizing the behavior of the students with the expectation of never leaving void the place occupied by the adults (Kehl, 2004), thus contributing to the maintenance of social order, without altering the dynamic of distribution of social privileges. The youths, in this way, are subjects under development, with a future to face and a past and present to be ignored. The youths are responsible for the transformation of the future itself and of the surrounding reality, but always in a future time.

Our relationship with the school allowed us to identify something that has been observed lately: the school has a fundamental role in the production and reproduction of (ir)rationality that justifies behaviors which are marked by strong prejudice (Borges & Meyer, 2008; Junqueira, 2009). In the school where the intervention-research was conducted, we identified the (re)production of prejudices, discriminatory actions, negative conceptions about the suburban youths and their families, naturalizations of the inequalities and violence that conformed to a certain model of promotion of citizenship: the rights and duties, in which the duties were demanded and few rights were constructed in the dialogue with the students. It is worth pointing out that this process lived by the students in contact with the other actors of the school offers elements to understand one of the concerns presented to the project team: that the students like the school, but are not interested in the classroom activities. In the face of such huge cultural clashes and silencing produced, it is possible to understand that the school yard, the break time and the projects become more interesting as spaces for the students, as they can create opportunities for a more horizontal dialogue in these spaces. It is important that a project that intends to discuss issues related to citizenship enable the unveiling of this dynamic, lending support to eventual tensions that may rise in this deconstruction and betting that the subjects present are capable of promoting some shift in relation to the little democratized dynamic.

A dynamic similar to those of the issues of generation, class, territory, race, and color can be found in relation to gender and sexuality issues. The school has been an institution that has supported situations such as homophobia, which result from the intentional naturalizations of norms and discourses that regulate our social organization to maintain the homogeneity and the heteronormativity of the social relations (Borges & Meyer, 2008). Homophobia here is understood as a hostile attitude targeted on male and female homosexuals that classifies the other as inferior, contrary or abnormal, excluding them from the human universe because of their differences (Borillo, 2001). Gender prescriptions also mark the dynamic of the social institutions and as part of the social fabric, including the school. Gender determines and imposes kinds of behavior, dress codes, and the likes which must be constantly watched over during the development of the individual so that he or she is not influenced or does not fall into “sexual deviations". The existence of a paradox is clear; heterosexuality is at the same time considered natural and must be watched. For such, it is necessary to differentiate male and female clothes and adornments adequate for each sex, as well as the behaviors that are permitted and expected from men and women. The way of speaking, walking, and the games the boys and girls play must all be guided and corrected.

Some of the abovementioned elements are noticed in the demands from the directors/coordinators (seen in that space as speakers of the school dynamic) in relation to the “heightened sexuality” of the students. In the discourse of the various school actors, this demand appears as references to moments when the rules determined by the heterosexuality or by the traditional sexual conventions are “disrespected.” Thus, in reference to the sexual behavior of the students, the school actors recall scenes in which the girls go to the boys for sexual-affective relationships, when the social convention says that they must wait for the boys to approach them. Other examples are

associated with homoaffective relationships between the students. The male heterosexual behavior is never brought up in relation to the inadequate affective behavior of the students in the school space. Presumably, what the school actors call “heightened sexuality” of the students is in fact what escapes the norm (heterosexual macho behavior). The school actors deal with homosexuality in the school space as if it did not have a name.

In interaction with the subordination mediated by the rationale of generation, authority and possession of knowledge and in relation to the place of residence, specifically in relation to the slum residents, machismo and homophobia contribute to “confirm the place that is possible” for the students of the school where we worked: the place of non-culture, of that which neither can nor could be totally civilized, the place of something “less than humane”, uncivilized and uncivilizable. Thus, social inadequacy, cultural shortage, and immaturity form the alchemical body that results in the delegitimizing of the youths in this school as actors capable of constructing the parameters of citizenship.

Final reflections

In our reflections, we pointed out a set of conceptions and a symbolic network that are shared about the students in the school where we carried out the intervention-research project and how they give shape to a certain model of promotion of citizenship within the school community. We point out what some authors have already highlighted in other studies: we experienced a moment of construction and perpetuation of a school that is characterized much more as a place of social conservation than of emancipation (Bourdieu, 1966). The mapping of the relationships between the various school actors also allowed the identification of postures and wishes for transformation of this reality in the discourses of the staff members, the students, the teachers, and the coordinators. This many times diverse posture was expressed ambiguously, with doubt and diffidence, indicating that this dynamic is also porous and that it is important to identify these gaps. However, we strengthen the idea that these reflections dealt more with the hemogenic discourses that prevailed in the daily school life and which legitimized the practices of non-citizenship.

The second step of the project started after the discussion with the actors of the school about the relationship mapping and, based on that, the actions to be taken jointly by the project team and the school actors were listed. The activities under way are varied: sexuality workshops with the students, meetings with the students’ familiars, workshops on violence and youth participation, and activities of sensitization of the teachers to enable them to take part in these actions. These activities have the objective of elaborating on the problems and breaking away from the processes of social exclusion and the naturalization of the relations of subaltern reproduced in the school space. The objective is to construct a process with the various actors in which they can perceive themselves as reproducers of the rationale of exclusion and prejudice, at the same time that they can see themselves as capable of constructing other forms of social interaction by means of continued work. We believe that citizenship is more than a task

to be accomplished or a set of procedures to be implemented, and that it can be shared, socialized, and reinvented in the daily school life.

The path covered has required an exercise of continued reflection on and analysis of team implication. The fact that the team is formed by university students for whom the slum and public school contexts are foreign or mainly known through the media and the sensationalist discourses about the suburbs and their residents has required the continued deconstruction of their own conceptions, the analysis of their places of power and of the effects of these positions on the relationship with the groups with whom we have worked. This has undeniably afforded an ethic and political repositioning in relation to the problems with which we have dealt, a process which has marked the origin of community psychology in Brazil. These reflections also raise questions on the relationship that the public university and science have established with the socially peripheral contexts and urge the deconstruction of the historical abyss that has been constructed between these two spaces in our society.

[i] The contacts with the municipal school investigated started in 2006 with an action-research proposal made by professors and researchers of the UFMG and of PUC Minas, together with leaders of the community.

[ii] The *Citizenship in Action* Project team is formed by an advisor professor and psychology undergraduate and graduate students. We are grateful to all who participated in the collective debate that inspired some of the reflections presented here. We also thank all those from the municipal school where the project was conducted for accepting it, (re)thinking and reflecting on their daily lives and their relationships.

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