



Please cite the source as:

Müller, V. (1999). Thinking about "Open Centers": a contribution from Brazil. *Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa*, 1 (1). Retrieved month day, year form: <http://redie.ens.uabc.mx/vol1no1/contents-muller.html>

Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa

Vol. 1, No. 1, 1999

Thinking About "Open Centers": A Contribution from Brazil

Pensando sobre los "centros abiertos": una contribución desde Brasil

Verónica Regina Müller
vm@wnet.com.br
Universidad Estatal de Maringa

Rua Braganca, 630/1001
87020 – 220
Paraná, Brazil

(Received: June 23, 1999; accepted for publication: August 16, 1999)

Abstract

This article approaches some principles considered essential to functioning of an "open center" in Brazil. The article emphasizes the absolute respect due the culture of the children and young people who live in the street and frequent the center. It first comments on the nature of citizenship, a concept that translates as a work principle in the open centers. Derived from this beginning are commentaries about the meaning of other themes such as participation, responsibility, respect, involvement, identity, culture and freedom. Finally, the open centers' work methodology is described.

Keywords: Street children, childrens rights, homeless people, outreach programs.

Resumen

Este artículo aborda algunos principios que se consideran básicos para el funcionamiento de un "centro abierto" en Brasil. El artículo resalta el absoluto respeto que debe haber hacia la cultura de los niños y jóvenes que viven en la calle y frecuentan el centro. Se comenta inicialmente el concepto de ciudadanía, concepto que significa un principio de trabajo en los centros abiertos. A partir de ahí, se derivan comentarios sobre el significado de otros temas como la participación, la responsabilidad, el respeto, la implicación, la identidad, la cultura y la libertad. Finalmente, se describe la metodología de trabajo de los centros abiertos.

Palabras clave: Derechos de los niños, niños de la calle, ciudadanía, centros educativos.

Introduction

This article is primarily based on my experience in projects with street children in Brazil, in the project "Children and Adolescents in the Street: the Art of Survival", developed by the Universidad of Maringá in direct and permanent contact with street children and youth. Another reference source is provided by two practical experiments that have been going on for years, and that form part of many children and young people's daily reality. I am speaking of the *Escola Municipal de Porto Alegre* (EPA)¹ located in the State of Río Grande del Sur, and the *Associação da Criança e do Adolescente de Londrina* (ACALON)² located in the state of Paraná, both in Brazil, caring for children who live on the street in a high-risk situation.

EPA and ACALON are schools that arose during the leftist administration in the decade of the 90's, and their objective is to care for a population at societal risk. They receive boys and girls with one or more of the following characteristics: they live in the streets and their sustenance depends on their work in the streets (cleaning cars, selling candy, begging), are drug addicts, victims of sexual abuse, practice prostitution, have problems with the police, and do not go to public school. EPA and ACALON are regular schools with officially-authorized teaching, but they develop methods geared to the particular culture of this type of students. ACALON offers, as well, workshops on hairdressing, baking, data processing, dry cleaning, sewing, and so forth. These workshops are a small source of income and jobs for the adolescents who study in them.

Both schools are financed by government and private agencies. The teachers who work there are college graduates, and most have advanced degrees. Some of these teachers have been trained by the *National Movement for Street Children*.

The educational experiences presented in this essay are not offered simply as models for imitation, but rather so that they may provide, at some time, an inspiration in the midst of a search for solutions to the standstill existing in some

organizations or administrative situations. They should assure us, then, that theory need not remain a mere exercise in philosophy, but is grounded in a reality already in progress. As Pedro Demo says (1996), "while never casting aspersion on a good theory, we need to know how to make proposals operational and critical" (p.13).³

Having stated these preliminary observations, we go on to what is more strictly the content of the theme.

Concepts that are principles or principles that are concepts

The end of the twentieth century offers a gamut of discussions about roads to the future, while many of the things in question are leftovers from the previous century: What is the role of the State in collective life and private life? What is the limit of the freedom of the individual and of the intervention of the State? What society do we desire? Is a society possible without social exclusion that respects individuality? Are the educational and social actions that come from private initiatives of collective bodies and organizations really effective?

I understand that the position we adopt toward the search for answers to these questions puts us in a conceptual camp that must consciously and explicitly orient professional practice if we want that practice to be coherent and significant.

First, it is necessary to illustrate what is meant by and assumed to be *citizenship*, so we can use that concept (and that principle) to orient the lines of action of the "open center", the object of discussion in this article.

The implications of citizenship

Children and young people should be considered as *citizens now*, not as future citizens, who will be citizens only when they become adults and workers (Müller, 1996). In terms of rights, they are, as such, equal to adults and to all other categories that might exist; in terms of needs they are different because of their age, because of the impossibility of their taking complete responsibility for their own survival.

The concepts in themselves carry with them a historical weight, reflect a cultural context of place and era; because of this, we want to call attention to a special aspect of the meaning of *citizenship*, a term that goes beyond the simple generalizations of the rights and duties "guaranteed" in the Magna Carta of each of the Federated States.

In the etymology of the word itself, we can see the importance of the subject's *possibility of participation* in the spaces of the city, in the powers of decision, in the

mechanisms that move the city, finally, in what determines and composes the very collective life, at every level. It means assuming, then, that the statement found in the Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (and confirmed in the Constitution of Brazil), that *all citizens are equal under the law*, should be applied and extended to all aspects of human life.⁴ As Núñez declares (1988):

(...) persons must have the judgmental capacity and material to make concrete the abstract freedoms and rights guaranteed by liberal constitutions (...) consequently they must possess in property or as a quota of collective property, sufficient goods for a worthy life, that is, indispensable for its dignity. As well, every person must have a personal sphere protected against the interference of every external power, above all, the State. As well, every human being must be able to participate, directly or indirectly, in the establishment of norms which later will regulate his social behaviors.

Juridical orientation toward the children and adolescents of Brazil is determined in a more specific manner by the *Statute for the Child and the Adolescent* (federal law 8069/90); a statute which is the result of an impressive social struggle which was able to guarantee by law the rehabilitation of several sectors of society. Important input received from children was also taken into consideration. This law is worthy of mention because it allows participation in civil society and creates mechanisms for that participation; in other words, it creates the *Councils of Rights*, which have a normative and supervisory character, and the *Child Protective Councils*, which give more immediate attention and have the obligation to oversee compliance with the law, and, last, the *Children's Foundations*, autonomous organizations existing at a municipal, state and federal level, which administer the obligatory government economic contribution. For the administration and supervision of all the councils, joint popular participation is legally guaranteed along with government representation. For the country in general, the Brazilian Constitution also contains directives for other forms of participation such as the plebiscite, referendum or the people's initiative.

Among other aspects, the guarantee of these rights is linked to the involvement of the subject and of the collectives in pursuing their rights and duties, their capacity for organization, their power of intervention, aspects that can permit desires to become realities and needs to be identified in the various interested groups.

The guarantee of rights is also linked to a material aspect. Just as poverty should be understood as "the repression of access to social advantages, not only as material want" (Demo, 1996, p. 10), citizenship "should be seen as a process which creates rights and spaces for the participation of the citizens" (Pereira, 1995, p.4) and not merely as *the right to subsistence* (Nuñez, 1999b).

Citizenship, responsibility, freedom and the construction of identity in an open center

What does the preceding have to do with open centers? An open center is a school with a philosophy, specific objectives and methods that facilitate spaces for child and adolescent participation. If an open center has to have certain norms that regulate the life of the center, those rules should reflect the active participation of the subjects involved in their proposal and decision. That does not mean they will decide anything and everything just as they wish, nor that only what they vote for will become a rule. This participation means that when the members of the center decide on certain rules, individuals will have many more possibilities to become consciously involved with their responsibility to obey them because the rules are related to their lives, to ideas they have had opportunity to express, to choices made with their participation.

In the ACALON as well as the EPA, on the organizations' functional level there are certain fixed rules, such as the prohibition against drugs in the establishment. There are other rules that are discussed; these are more related to themes developed in the classes and workshops. In the case of the EPA, for example, it was the decision of a group of students in a percussion workshop to participate in a *Samba School* the day of *Carnaval*. That meant a commitment on their part regarding learning and dedication in the rehearsals, besides a commitment to come at the appointed hour and day. Out of the rehearsals came the suggestion (which was later carried out) to give musical support and encouragement to the *carnaval* of the *State Foundation for the Welfare of Minors* (FEBEM), an institution which receives children and youth who commit legal infractions and are arrested. In the case of ACALON, on the other hand, the activity of making clothing with recycled materials in the arts workshop resulted in a very successful fashion show (with the children themselves as models); the show was open to the community. This involved following through with a series of dates and commitments in order to carry out what they wanted and had agreed to do.

So we present another concept we consider fundamental in the proper functioning of an open center: *responsibility*. Active participation brings responsibility with it, responsibility which is individual in front of and within a group, which recognizes in every human being a role he must play. This is a responsibility to respect the rules of an environment, of a group of persons, of a proposal for living together, of life in a specific space and time. The subjects arrive there with their culture and, if they do not have the opportunity to become involved in the process of making some of the rules of operation and behavior in that space, it is logically impossible for them to understand or, consequently, to obey them. In many of these cases, we find that the subjects are maladapted and their situation requires special attention, besides which there exists the impediment of their frequenting certain entities. This institutional procedure is confronted with the basic idea of *citizenship* that we have been emphasizing all along. We must understand that there are different cultures living together in almost identical spaces, some more excluded

than others, but each with moral principles, communication codes, rituals, history, defense mechanisms and attack characteristics, political forms of organization, exoneration...

For example, when one day we invited M.⁵ (15 years old) to join in the soccer game we had in the plaza nearly every Saturday, he said he couldn't because his whole body hurt.

–And why does it hurt?

–Because a gang of street kids beat me up.

–And why?

–Because I saw them steal a purse from a mother that was carrying her little kid in her arms. I ran after them, got the purse back and gave it back to the lady. It's not fair to rob a mother with a little kid. You can't do that.

–And then?

–They came that night and beat me up, to punish me.

In this bit of dialogue we can perceive diverse implicit concepts which present a vision of the world that may surprise us because it is different from what seems obvious: M., in spite of having the same social and economic condition as that of the gang members, sees them as different, having less integrity than himself. He has his own concept of "street kids" and he does not consider himself one of them. He is concerned about his worthiness, and in spite of having committed and continuing to commit some misdemeanors, he does not consider it a worthy act to rob a mother with a small child. From an external perspective, it is more logical to think that stealing, no matter from whom, is unacceptable.

In the case of the children who live in the streets in Brazil there are many families –including some of three generations– who have only known the street as a home. There are lives, histories, once and for all, cultures that are being constructed and constituted by the same elements as any other. The children that come from these cannot simple be classified as maladapted. We have to understand their culture and respect it.

Behind respect there is always the theme of *liberty*, which is, in short, what inspires the existence of an open center. If the need is felt for a center that promotes attention in a different manner from that of the schools or commonly existing organizations, it is because there exists the conviction that certain children and young people deserve to be respected in their peculiarity, deserve, therefore, to have the liberty to be culturally what they are, without being excluded from society because of it. They are commonly excluded in many ways, for instance, because of prejudice; and also because of a lack of adaptation to the traditional culture of schools or organizations.

Let us go on to another concept that I see as basic in the institutional pedagogical labor of these characteristics: *identity*. Studious adults recognize particular

characteristics in some children and young people; it is absolutely essential that they also recognize themselves, identifying themselves as individuals and groups, that is, that they feel themselves part of a whole, that they are located historically, socially and culturally within the world, understanding their situation without losing their perception of themselves.

Inasmuch as the body is an element of an individual's self-knowledge, it is fitting to recount another experience here. A teacher of Physical Education, after doing some exercises and playing with some models of the human body with children of the municipal aid organization in the city of Maringá,⁶ children are from seven to ten years old, asked them to draw their body on a piece of cardboard. Of the twenty drawings, not one showed a complete body. In the majority the face was incomplete, often by half. The drawings lacked legs, arms; there was a great disproportion in the sizes of the parts, and sometimes there were lines on top of the drawing. There were drawings of cars, trees or television personalities. The analysis of a group of psychologists, based on these drawings and other indicators, points toward many of these children's lack of knowledge about themselves, and logically about their role and the position of their culture in the world. Under these conditions, one can imagine that it will be difficult for them to gain the autonomy supposedly desired by the organization, or the citizenship it involves as part of the course of their lives.

How does an open center work?

Considering the students as "actors, and not just needy persons who must be helped" (Nuñez, 1988), the EPA starts work with the rereading of Paulo Freire, with authors like Tomás Tadeu da Silva, Mocir Gadotti, Pablo Gentili, Antonio Gouveia and others. Work is done in the following manner: the teachers promote a variety of conversations and debates, among and with the students in order to find out what worries them, the themes that make up part of their world. Then, using the subjects brought up by the children and young people, they make a transparency showing a graphic map of the relationships the students establish between the themes. Among the teachers, study groups try to decipher more precisely the students' concepts of each theme mentioned, of the relationship students establish between them, and to grasp what might be the essence or the priority of their worry. In other words, they shape a network of knowledge based on the vision of the students. These same study groups give continuity to the process, researching up-to-date bibliography on the themes in question, and during the studies they use a transparency to make another graphic map, which reflects the construction of basic knowledge in a more academic way, shaping another network of knowledge. They work principally on the concepts, and based on these another network is made, reflecting the possible relationship between the students' knowledge and the knowledge selected by the teachers for establishing relationships with the socio-historico-economic cultural context, which encloses the school. The lesson

plans in different areas are the immediate result of the thematic points identified and selected.

For example, let us suppose that, beginning with the contact with the students, the work reveals the theme most evident in the children's worries. They say that they need to work, and the reason is survival. They speak of the family, which has difficulties and because of them ends up living in the streets. They say that they get into the world of drugs because access to it is easy in their environment, and they end up involved in it to get some money.

The concepts and their relationships would be made into a graphic map. In the sequence, key words like work, survival, family, street, drugs are amply conceptualized. The teachers would study this theme deeply in an interdisciplinary group, they would construct another graphic map to re-design this new knowledge deepening the concepts, including the presentation of new concepts and relationships. Only then would the monthly and daily activities be programmed and divided into areas like Portuguese, mathematics, sciences, arts, foreign language, data processing and such, all with the intention of allowing the students to make a new and more elaborate reading of reality.

The principles which orient all this action meet six basic criteria, which are: a) reality as a starting point for a construction of knowledge and critical action in society; b) the historical, social, economic and cultural context enclosing the school; c) the interdisciplinary focus; d) the contribution of the various areas of knowledge; e) the generation of knowledge which sustains the designated practice; f) the formation of critical, participative, fraternal, ethical subjects.

There does not exist, therefore, a curriculum with previously defined contents or annual courses previously structured. The students must reach different levels and they do it each one at his/her own pace. So then an open center must have a pedagogical purpose, choosing to be a school with regular teaching, or not.

Both the experience of EPA and that of the ACALON are very important, but clearly each center has its way of defining its objectives, considering its own specific reality. This theme especially, along with others such as the design of service and social education, professional training policies, the need for projects for generating rent in certain centers,⁷ the involvement of families, links with other government and non-government organizations, salaries of the professionals, and material conditions, is fundamental and indispensable for complementing what might be basic ideas for an open center that approaches an educational ideal desired by educators and youth.

Translator: Lessie Evona York-Weatherman

UABC Mexicali

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acci@arrakis.es.

(Cooperación-Infancia Brasil)

¹ Municipal School of Porto Alegre.

² Londrina Association for Children and Adolescents.

³ All the translations of the Portuguese originals into Spanish are by the author.

⁴ The emphasis is by the author.

⁵ M. is one of the street boys who is part of the Local Commission of the *National Movement for Street Children* of Maringá and also of the project "The Art of Survival."

⁶ This experience took place in an organization that receives children at an hour when they are not in class. Among its objectives are the conquest of their "citizenship" and their "autonomy". They are lower-class children, who are practically forced to be there, because the adults responsible for them have no place to leave them, or think that this will give the children an opportunity to get into better schools, which is not necessarily true. This research will be explained in a more detailed manner in the book: Müller, V. (In press). *Crianças e adolescentes: a arte de sobreviver*.

⁷ This refers to projects directed toward poor families, and which help them in the production and sale of some product.