Street Children in Brazil and their Right to Education

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Summary

This article examines the unequal educational circumstances, options, and practical barriers to social mobility, faced by street children and adolescents in Brazil.

Keywords

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The street child, as a phenomenon, has long been associated in international media with the image of Brazil's poverty and inequality. Photographs of unaccompanied children and adolescents asking for handouts or performing juggling acts for money at busy traffic intersections in urban Brazil have frequently attracted the lens of foreign journalists. Beneath this media image lies a much more complex reality of Brazil's entrenched social and economic inequalities. It is in this complexity that we need to situate the challenges of deprived childhood that impact the education of street children and adolescents in Brazil.

Children and adolescents in street situations[1] have been the focus of several studies since the 1980s, when the problem started gaining visibility in Brazil and in many other countries (Rizzini, 1986; Rizzini & Butler, 2003). Young people on the streets became strongly associated with criminality and were seen as 'threats' to society, leading to the repressive public policies of their widespread institutionalisation. However, sustained activism by progressive citizen groups and human rights organisations slowly began to change the social discourse on street children and adolescents and eventually made the inhuman practices of institutionalisation morally unacceptable. Inspired by the passage of UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), in 1990, Brazil adopted its highly progressive constitutional Statute on the Rights of Children and Adolescents (or ECA, as known by its Portuguese abbreviation). It was a watershed moment:

> There was a new sense of hope that things could indeed change and the possibility of change was clearly associated with the idea of citizenship—a hope that was expressed in the popular motto—*de menor a cidadão*: from minors[2] to citizens… This expression was often used in Brazil in the 1990s, particularly by advocates, to mark the struggle to recognize that all children, including poor children, had rights as citizens (Rizzini, 2011, p. 67).

Much has changed for the better in the past two-and-a-half decades. Policies have evolved and welfare support has increased to prevent small children from wandering on the streets. Cash transfer programs, such as *Bolsa Familia* (family allowances), have improved the conditions of millions of families in extreme poverty. Most importantly, the human rights impetus of ECA has shifted the perception of street children from sources of danger to young people who are 'subjects of rights' and citizens. However, alarmingly, there is an almost complete absence of public concern about the education of street children in Brazil today.

On the one hand, Brazil has made important progress in educating its children—with near-universal (98 per cent) enrolment of 7-14 year old children in mandatory basic education (grades 1 to 9). Yet, for a populous country like Brazil, the 2 per cent unenrolled represent around half a million vulnerable children. That number increases significantly when one considers the 15-17 year olds who have dropped out of school—approximately 1.5 million adolescents (UNICEF, 2012). While efforts to universalise basic education continue to focus on historically excluded subgroups of population, such as Afro-Brazilians, indigenous people, *quilombolas*, children with disabilities, and children from low-income families in the semi-arid rural areas of the Northeast, the unique plight of urban street children and adolescents remains unaddressed.

Life on the streets exposes children to threats that are likely to irreversibly damage their development—drug use, sex for survival, absence of safe and secure shelters, and the daily difficulty of availing basic hygiene and securing enough food (Morais N., Koller, Reis, & Morais, C., 2010). Further, adolescents who are on the streets 24 hours a day have lost connection, not only with educational institutions, but to their home communities (Rizzini, Butler, & Stoecklin, 2007). For such young people, the chances of reconnecting with mainstream society and economy seem nearly impossible, unless there are specially designed social policies that go beyond ensuring access to schools.

As Silva (2005) has pointed out, for children on the streets, the problem is not only access to educational institutions but also their regular attendance in schools. Her study about the differences between the world of the streets and the world of education—conducted with adolescents in shelters—concludes that it is necessary to change the organisation and structure of schools to create mechanisms that would enable them to more effectively serve street children and adolescents.

Unfortunately, the status quo of educational inequality in Brazil persists. It includes an incomplete move to full day schooling and the poor conditions in public schools serving low-income children, where few students pay attention to what the teacher is saying and the majority just play around. We should add to these problems the largely demoralised teaching force in public schools. Such inequalities risk further intensification in the face of the current economic and political crises in Brazil.

For example, it is estimated that a quarter of the young population in the city of Rio de Janeiro lives in intensely poor communities called favelas. While many of these children are growing up in loving families, they are also growing up in noisy, densely populated, unhygienic conditions, and under the constant threat of drugs and gang-related violence. Unequal schooling in such a social context not only limits the cognitive potential of children and adolescents in favelas, but also deprives them of the social capital that is necessary to improve their opportunity structures (Chattopadhay, 2014).

The narrowing of possibilities for the social mobility of young people within a consumer society, whose fruits remain inaccessible, fuels a sense of hopelessness, desperation, and alienation among adolescents growing up in the *favelas* of Brazil (Abramovay, 1999)—and these make gangs a powerful 'pull factor'. As Silva and Urani (2002) have noted, gangs operate by using low-income communities as their bases for logistic support. Indeed, co-opting disenchanted youth from low-income communities remains a way of maintaining a broader trafficking system, where children and adolescents are used as part of the constant violent confrontation between criminal groups and police. As a result, today, a greater proportion of street children are older adolescents; and unlike previous years, they are more likely to be involved with drugs and drug-related gang activities.

Thus, seen through the lenses of multi-dimensional poverty and human capabilities (Sen, 1999), the right to education for street children and adolescents in Brazil is a necessary right, but not a sufficient one to fulfil their right to childhood. As we have argued here, the phenomenon of street children is the 'tip of the iceberg' of what constitutes the plight of urban poverty for children and adolescents in Brazil. Re-imagining education that addresses the broader consequences of urban poverty is an important step towards a new possibility of childhood, with rights and dignity for the children of Brazil.

Endnotes

1. We use the phrase 'children in street situations' to include both those who live on the streets night and day, and those who spend their days on the streets but their nights sleeping at, for example, their homes, with friends, or in shelters.
2. 'Minor' in this context and in the Portuguese word menor means not just young people but also those seen as potentially dangerous.

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