

Original Article

# Young people's trajectories and the construction of organic intellectuals<sup>1,2</sup>

## *Trajetórias juvenis e a construção de intelectuais orgânicos/as*

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### **Abstract**

Based on the follow-up of a young woman, we sought to understand how and what experiences contribute to the formation of more socially active young people – from a Gramscian perspective, organic intellectuals. The question is, therefore, which experiences have or have had an influence on the lives of young people that contribute or have contributed to constructing processes towards social emancipation? To this end, an individual territorial follow-up—a social technology developed by social occupational therapy—was used, resulting in descriptions and analyses of situations so that this young woman could engender movements of catharsis, highlighting her participation and protagonism in university extension actions, virtual environments, student guild events, and activities linked to a high school research program. It is expected that this study will provide references for strategies to strengthen youth networks and foster the creation and expansion of different collective spaces where young people move about, whether in person or virtually so that they can cope with the vulnerabilities that surround their everyday life.

**Keywords:** Youth; Education; Education, Primary and Secondary; Social Participation.

### **Resumo**

A partir do acompanhamento de uma trajetória de vida juvenil, buscou-se apreender de que forma e quais experiências colaboram para constituir jovens mais ativos socialmente – em uma perspectiva gramsciniana: intelectuais orgânicos/as.

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<sup>2</sup> The material is part of this research and all applicable ethical procedures involving human beings have been adhered to. The study was authorized by the Ethics Committee of the UNIFESP under protocol CAAE No. 78051617.8.0000.5505.

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Questiona-se, portanto: quais seriam as experiências que incidem/incidiram sobre as vidas juvenis que contribuem/contribuíram para a construção de processos na direção da emancipação social? Assim, utilizou-se do acompanhamento singular e territorial — tecnologia social descrita e elaborada pela terapia ocupacional social — resultando nas descrições e análises de situações para que uma jovem engendrasse movimentos de catarse, destacando sua participação em ações de extensão universitária, ambientes virtuais, grêmio estudantil e atividades vinculadas ao programa de iniciação científica do ensino médio (PIBIC-EM). Projeta-se que este estudo ofereça referências para estratégias de fortalecimento das redes de jovens e fomento a criação e ampliação de diferentes espaços coletivos por onde os jovens transitam, sejam eles presenciais ou virtuais, de tal modo que possam enfrentar as diferentes vulnerabilidades que cercam seus cotidianos.

**Palavras-chave:** Juventude; Educação; Educação Básica; Participação Social.

## Introduction

This study presents partial results from two university undergraduate research projects and a high school research project conducted within the Extension Project “Youth and Funk in the Baixada Santista: Territories, Networks, Health, and Education”<sup>3</sup> at the Federal University of São Paulo (UNIFESP), Baixada Santista campus, in collaboration with public schools in the city of Santos, state of São Paulo, Brazil. The underlying assumption is that through extension practices, materials are brought together to facilitate understanding of the real world and establish strong bonds of trust with young people, some of whom will contribute as collaborators in this research (Lopes et al., 2008).

Based on the categories of plural youth, the Gramscian concepts of “catharsis” and “organic intellectual”, and immersed in the school environment (Pereira, 2017), we began to observe movements toward an expansion of critical self-awareness among young people, as well as how they fostered their sociability within the gaps of the hegemonic adult-centric discourse. This characterization, thus, constitutes a central issue in this study. In the face of these experiences, we began to question ourselves and, therefore, present as the central question of our investigation: What are the experiences that impact/have impacted the lives of young people and contribute/have contributed to the construction of processes toward social emancipation?

Therefore, this study aimed to follow up on the lives of some of the young individuals known through the Extension Project who prompted this questioning. In this text, we will delve deeper into one of these lives, with the literature review presented below serving as the theoretical framework.

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<sup>3</sup> Developed by the Interdisciplinary Laboratory of Human, Social and Health Sciences (LICHSS)/UNIFESP and METUIA/UNIFESP.

## **Young People**

The theoretical framework that guides us apprehends the category of youth through the construction of different definitions over the years, based on historical and cultural premises. It has become necessary and present in various studies and fields of work to understand young people as social subjects who interpret the world, assigning meaning to it and understanding the position they occupy within it, as well as their relationships with other subjects, their history, and uniqueness (Sposito et al., 2020).

Thus, it is emphasized the plural and heterogeneous nature of the different youth experiences, assuming, therefore, the denomination of Young People. To support this perspective, the studies by Margulis & Urresti (1996) and Sposito et al. (2018) confirm the impossibility of assuming a univocal concept of what it means to be young because of the diverse meanings attributed to youth experiences.

Based on this, according to the most recent data available from the 2010 Census (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2012), young people aged 15 to 29 represent a quarter of the Brazilian population, totaling 51.3 million. In addition to this expansion, there is a higher incidence of violence and violations in this age group, represented by the homicide rates in Brazil. Data from the 2020 Atlas of Violence indicate that over 50% of the people murdered in the country in 2018 were young individuals between the ages of 15 and 29. Analyzing the age groups more specifically, the numbers show that 55.6% of the deaths were among young people aged 15 to 19; 52.3% in the age range of 20 to 24, and 43.7% among those aged 25 to 29. Regarding the race-ethnicity of the individuals who die as a result of homicide, over 70% of them are identified as black (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, 2020).

The current scenario of genocide and violence in which young people are entangled can only be understood through contextualization within the socio-economic-cultural sphere. This is affirmed within a capitalist-racist-patriarchal society (Cisne, 2018). On the one hand, young black and poor people are indiscriminately killed, while on the other hand, young girls (but not exclusively) are increasingly becoming victims of femicides (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, 2021).

Iamamoto (2008) contributes to this contextualization through her studies on the fetishization of capital. According to that author, the incorporation of science into the production process has been coupled with a period of capital centralization and concentration, thus driving progress in productivity. As a result, the working class produces more, and capitalists extract a greater surplus value, which extends working hours and intensifies the production process. However, this process occurs at a faster rate than consumption, leading to increased competition among workers. According to Marx, “[...] the law of accumulation is expressed, in the capitalist orbit, in reverse: in the fact that the portion of the working population always grows more rapidly than the requirement for their employment for capital valorization [...]” (Marx, 1985, p. 209).

According to Iamamoto (2008), in the Brazilian context, this process occurs during the Civil and Military Dictatorship (1964-1985), characterized by monopolistic expansion, the internationalization of the economy, and the promotion of conservative modernization. As a result, there is an exacerbation of structural unemployment and a flexibilization of the workforce, leading to precarious living conditions. The State, in turn, directly intervenes in the economic sphere, acting as the executive committee of

the bourgeoisie captured by monopolistic logic. Consequently, the State begins to manage the expressions of the social question as “social problems”, administrating their refraction and reinforcing an appearance of a private nature by isolating people's problems. Still, according to that author, it is in this way that the State ends up “[...] administrating and managing the class conflict not only through coercion but also by seeking to build consensus favorable to the functioning of society in addressing the social question [...]” (Iamamoto, 2008, p. 171).

It is within this context that society, under the logic of capitalism, starts producing discourse about “disorderly”, undisciplined, delinquent young people that form criminal gangs. However, this discourse does not explicitly acknowledge the relationship between the advance of capitalism and the social problems associated with youth both in social discourse and in the sciences (Groppo & Silveira, 2020). Thus, young people become the target of State intervention and action only when their living conditions are aggravated by the exacerbation of the social question, revealing a contested logic between young people as subjects of rights or as a “problem” category (Barreiro & Malfitano, 2017).

Therefore, the data on youth mortality (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, 2020), coupled with the prevalence of social issues in the social interactions of Brazilian young people, emphasize the importance of taking care of them. This care can be achieved through the expansion of spaces for socialization and sociability, where their voices are genuinely heard and not silenced by violence, mortality, and the absence of public policies. In contrast to the previously mentioned perspectives that view young people as a risk category or a social problem, the focus should be on the transformation and expansion of social and human rights, as well as on improving living conditions and life experiences. Given the numerous processes of violence experienced throughout their historical and social trajectories, there is a concerning trend toward normalizing and naturalizing this violence, which results in its increasing prevalence.

Thus, there is a trend toward the development of a perspective that aims to foster the autonomy, solidarity, and active participation of young people in addressing challenges through active and constructive engagement. This agrees with what Costa (1998) defined as youth protagonism. However, studies by Souza (2006) highlight actions based on this “youth protagonism” that position young people as objects of intervention rather than subjects. According to that author, the discourse of youth protagonism emerges as a way to address “social problems” (Souza, 2006) associated with youth, aiming to refute the image of the apathetic and alienated young person and proposing a new form and a possible model of political action: private activism directed to re-establishing and reproducing a social order as a consensus forged by discourse.

Therefore, it is necessary to contribute to the creation of spaces for youth voices, reaffirming the role of young people as key agents in the transformative processes that need to impact them and emerge from them. In this regard, Antonio Gramsci provides a theoretical framework to guide us toward how this process can be truly experienced in the formation of organic intellectuals. It is in this sense that we point to an interpretation of these young people as organic intellectuals, not from a perspective of protagonism.

## **Cathartic Processes and the Organic Intellectual**

According to Gramsci (2000), there is indeed a need for social beings to assume awareness of their history to learn how the ideology of the dominant social class is organized and structured, that is, how the “[...] material organization aimed at maintaining, defending, and developing the theoretical-ideological front [...]” is developed (Gramsci, 2000, p. 332).

Indeed, according to author, if a social group has its understanding of the world, it represents liberation from the reproduction of values, ideologies, and labor force in favor of the dominant group. It is within this theoretical framework that Gramsci introduces the concept of “hegemony” as the moral and political leadership of a class that holds power over the whole society. He argues that the dominant class will transcend its interests to incorporate the interests of the subordinate classes and will forge a consensus through the false representation of collective interests. In other words, hegemony does not refer to domination, but rather to the ability of a class to unify its social project around its interests, combining consensus and coercion (Gramsci, 2000).

In this sense, the organic intellectual is closely connected to the processes of hegemony formation and the concept of State in Gramsci's work (2000), always in a dialectical relationship with the world. Therefore, as all social beings become aware of their history, it requires attention and effort from these intellectuals to enable the subaltern class group to engage in a counter-hegemonic movement. This movement aims to express a class conception and recognize the contradiction inherent in capitalist society to challenge its naturalized state.

Therefore, the organic intellectual is the one who will foster the process of consciousness within the working class through a path that Gramsci (1991) defines as catharsis. Catharsis is understood as the transition from common sense, which corresponds to the reproduction of dominant ideology without conscious reflection, to critical sense, which involves moving beyond the apparent and reflecting on the essence. Thus, the cathartic moment will unfold in a way that transforms the previously naturalized structure into a possibility for transformation, opening pathways to freedom as a means to create a new ethical-political form of reproducing social relations.

Catharsis is classified as the effective process of transforming not only subjects' reality but also that of groups, producing individuals capable of constructing the “historical bloc” of society that dialectically integrates hegemony—meaning the forces of the economic sphere—with cultural expressions and the participation of the subaltern class, which Gramsci (2000) refers to as counter-hegemony. It is from the perspective that the consciousness and reflection of individuals—who are capable of understanding and achieving them—are hijacked by dominant ideology and its ways of reproducing and establishing itself as a hegemonic consensus that we understand the organic intellectuals' role not as that of leaders, distancing themselves from the class they represent and identify with, but rather as carrying out an educational and grassroots work (Duriguetto, 2014). Based on these premises, we undertook the individual territorial follow-ups described below.

## **Method**

The research involved the systematic collection of information through individual territorial follow-ups (Lopes et al., 2011; Pan et al., 2022) of four young people for approximately two years. In-depth interviews (Minayo & Costa, 2018) were conducted when we deemed it necessary to capture statements that had not been expressed during the follow-up process.

The young people who participated in this study were recruited through the involvement of the researchers in municipal and state schools in the city of Santos through the university extension project. It is important to emphasize that the relationship between the young participants and their willingness to think and reflect on the processes discussed here went beyond a simple researcher-subject dynamic, facilitated by a mere request to participate in the research. This willingness is also the result of interventionist and formative processes that have occurred within a university extension program since 2015, enabling access to profound and intimate aspects of their own lives (Borba et al., 2020).

In this study, we chose to focus on the life trajectory of a young woman. This decision was based on the fact that her history was the most profound and extensive, and it provided more explicit elements for the argument we intended to make regarding her formation as an “organic intellectual”. In addition, from the second year of the study, she became an institutional researcher affiliated with UNIFESP through the High School Research Institutional Program (PIBIC-EM). This dual role allowed her to simultaneously occupy two identities in the research process: researcher and collaborator.

Therefore, it was decided to maintain the real name of the young woman throughout her life narrative, as she is also a co-author of this text, having assumed the position and authority to speak and share her knowledge about the situation. To include her name is to acknowledge authorship to someone who collaborated with us and contributed to building what would not have been possible or imaginable without her. This decision complies with Article 9 of Resolution No. 510/2016 of the National Health Council (Brasil, 2016), which establishes specific ethical guidelines for human and social sciences. The young woman authorized her identification and reaffirms our position.

This is, therefore, participatory action research that intends to assign:

[...] different roles to popular agents in the management of spheres of power throughout the research process, as well as in the management of social action processes within which participatory research tends to be conceived as a tool, a method of scientific action, or a moment within a broader and more continuous popular work with pedagogical and political dimensions, often broader and of greater continuity than the research itself (Brandão & Borges, 2007, p. 53).

In agreement with Brandão & Borges (2007), we approach the research from a participatory standpoint, which is committed to understanding social reality in a shareable way through the interaction of different knowledge. The empirical interlocutors are thus involved in the scientific production as co-authors of the jointly constructed knowledge, shifting and converting the traditional subject-object relationship into a subject-subject relationship.

In this sense, the study has an educational and politically formative vocation that is organic, as it generates a process of research-education-action aimed at

[...] transforming an unequal and exclusionary society ruled by market principles and values, in favor of the humanization of social life. The knowledge produced in participatory research should be produced, understood, and integrated as an alternative emancipatory form of popular knowledge (Brandão & Borges, 2007, p. 55).

Regarding the individual territorial follow-ups (Lopes et al., 2011; Pan et al., 2022), the assumptions described and developed by social occupational therapy were taken as one of the main methodological resources in this study. This approach enables the understanding of the experiences shared by young people and their life trajectories, combined with the field experience carried out by the Extension Project team. As Lopes et al. (2014) argue, this social technology provides “[...] a more real perception and interaction with individuals’ everyday life and context, interconnecting their histories and paths, their current situation, and their network of relationships [...]” (Lopes et al., 2014, p. 597). The individual territorial follow-ups provided attentive listening and aimed to address issues related to social inequality and access to social goods and services – essential aspects in the lives of the individuals who were heard and followed up.

All the follow-ups were recorded in field journals, and the interviews were audio-recorded. The corresponding files were transcribed in full. Both the transcriptions and narratives were returned to the collaborators. In the individual territorial follow-up presented here, based on the established trust, we had the opportunity to construct the narrative more collaboratively. With the material on hand and through several meetings, a possibility for critical reinterpretation was created, allowing the contents to be (re)evaluated to maintain what truly composed the life trajectory in the constitution of what we refer to as organic intellectuals, bringing the relationship between theory and everyday life to the concreteness of the particular life of a young person: the feelings, emotions, symbols, and values that are meaningful to her.

## **Results**

Marcia is a 22-year-old woman who was 15 when we met. She lives in Santos, on the coast of the state of São Paulo, Brazil, in an area known as the “Intermediate Zone”, as it is located between the beachfront and the center of the municipality. This young woman has lived all her life in this region, in the same neighborhood where the Health and Society Institute of UNIFESP Baixada Santista campus is located. Marcia attended elementary and high school in a public school in the same territory.

For many decades, the neighborhoods in the central region comprised the noble part of the city, but because of a process of impoverishment, it became concentrated along the beachfront. In the 1980s, the coffee trading market of Santos, which was held at the Coffee Stock Exchange located in the Historic Center, was transferred to São Paulo, the state capital. This initiated a process of impoverishment in the region, characterized by real estate speculation, justified by the shift in economic interests resulting from this event.

The changes caused by this process led to the transformation of the once affluent mansions into tenements and offices of export companies linked to the port. Thus, the central region of Santos exemplifies one of the strong demonstrations of inequality within the municipality, with a significant social and economic contrast (Borba et al., 2016).

In addition, in the 2000s, UNIFESP installed its Baixada Santista campus in that region, more specifically for the Vila Mathias neighborhood, as part of a political process of using that territory so that it could be valued and revitalized (Kurka et al., 2013).

The story of this young girl begins with her involvement in this territory, which she perceives as a place that "(...) *is forgotten and associated with prejudice against its dwellers. They have this burden: if you're with someone from Ponta da Praia<sup>4</sup>, they won't want to visit you*" (Interview with Marcia, p. 2). She grew up there with her father, a brother, and three sisters. For most of the time we followed her up, the young girl lived with her father, who had been widowed for several years. He ran a small business on the street where UNIFESP is located.

We met Marcia during one of the workshops we conducted at her school through the university extension project in 2015. At that time, she was in her 1st year of high school. The workshops focused on the themes of gender and racial relations (Silva & Borba, 2018), with a particular emphasis on a series of activities centered around the topic of "violence against women". The group of extensionists screened the movie "Sonhos Roubados" (Stolen Dreams) (Tolomelli & Werneck, 2010) for two classes: one comprising Freshman students and another comprising Junior students from high school. The film served as a starting point for discussion and the subsequent creation of a mural by the students.

She reports that those workshops were the first moments in her life when she felt she had the right to speak, realizing that her voice could be recognized, multiplied, and heard with care and affection. Throughout the workshops, we strengthened our bonds of trust and, at each meeting, she expressed herself more, allowing and engendering processes of reflection between high school and university students.

After these workshops, we noticed the curiosity of the young people concerning the University. So we invited them for a guided tour of the campus and presented the courses, classrooms, library, and student space, always with the perspective that that space should also be shared and open to residents of the neighborhood and the city.

During this visit, Marcia said that her dream was to study Psychology and, at that moment, we asked her: Why not at UNIFESP? At the public university down the street from the school where you grew up? So close to your home? This was her answer to these questions:

*I saw the college being built, it was on my way to school. So it was like "Wow, there's going to be a cool thing here!" (...) and then it was like, "We have a university next to the school!". But it was only when I got here, when I got to know the extension that, like, I knew there was the course I wanted to take and others that I didn't even know existed and today I want to take them too. But, like, it was a process when we came and got to know places and it was that enchanting thing. I had never seen a federal university. And I was like, "Boy, this is public! Wow, I can come in!" (Interview with Marcia, p. 3).*

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<sup>4</sup>Upscale neighborhood of the city.

Marcia also reports that she started to feel more secure and to express her positions on social networks more frequently, making new friends and getting closer to people who, along with her, also showed dissatisfaction with the reality experienced in their schools and society.

On a social media platform, Facebook®, a situation occurred that, under our analysis, marks one of the catharses that compose her construction as an organic intellectual. The key situation unfolded after a junior high-school female student reported to the school administration that a classmate had touched her body inappropriately. The school's management responded by implementing a ban on the use of leggings<sup>5</sup> by female students on the school premises, assuming that the incident was a consequence of the girl's clothing choice. Thus, the school coordinator visited all classrooms across different periods to communicate the incident and the management's decision, believing that this rule would prevent any future occurrences.

Marcia interpreted the rule as another form of reproduction of male chauvinism under the auspices of a false moralism filed by the school administration. This action expressed a worldview that blamed the girl (victim) and not the boy (perpetrator). To make matters worse, it submitted everyone to a norm that did not problematize the existence of the offense or the violated body. Faced with this, Marcia published a strong position on her Facebook® page, as follows:

*Today something happened that all the girls wondered about: will there be a lengthy post? Yes, there will be. A member of our school's management sent a message "to the girls" saying that we should not wear tight shorts, otherwise, we wouldn't be allowed to enter the school. OK, fair enough. School is not the place for that type of clothing. But then this person decided to add to her speech, causing unanimous outrage in the class. She said that by wearing the famous leggings, girls were giving boys the freedom to look at them maliciously because leggings "highlight too much" the female body. She also said that if we wore leggings to school and some boys touched us, it wouldn't matter, because the school couldn't do anything about it. Since we chose to wear that type of pants, she said, "We are asking to be touched". With that sexist comment, I asked her if she thought it was fair to blame us when this behavior comes from the boys. She simply said that I knew nothing and that women should respect themselves. Well, I don't need to earn respect, I deserve it as my right! The school should be teaching boys that YOU CANNOT TOUCH ANYONE'S BODY WITHOUT PERMISSION, NO MATTER WHAT THE PERSON IS WEARING. But in reality, the school is teaching boys to judge women who "deserve" to be abused. I found it absurd, so yes, I came here to complain. I won't stop wearing leggings, and if any boy touches me, I will call the police since the school can't do anything about it. This kind of thing has left me bewildered, by how society regresses upon every advance. I hope she only said this in my class because younger boys who hear it might think they are right and that the blame is on us, but it's not. My body, my rules, yes. The message should not have been for girls, it should have been for boys, teaching them not to touch where is not appropriate (Excerpt from Marcia's post).*

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<sup>5</sup>Model of pants that fit the body and are conventionally used by women.

In an act of courage and strength, Marcia also tagged the school in her post. Several events resulted from the student's position: the situation had repercussions among colleagues, teachers, and management, also resulting in the "expulsion" of the university extension project from the school since, among the themes that the project worked on, was reflection and criticism of patriarchal society and its ways of reproducing male chauvinism in everyday relationships.

On the one hand, this episode resulted in the expulsion of the university extension project from that school; on the other hand, it was in this project that Marcia realized the potential of her voice, understanding the need to expose what had long bothered her about the dynamics of the school, particularly its management, and the numerous reproductions of sexism in the institution's everyday life. From this realization, she understood that information, reflections, and the deconstruction of norms needed to reach the other students. This recognition made her well-known within the school and ultimately led to her inclusion in the student council as vice-president when that space was reactivated.

In the context of the student guild, Marcia deepened her bonds with some friends who, together, expanded their critical consciousness through their intersecting histories, shaped by social markers such as social class, gender, race-color, and territory (Melo et al., 2020), and how these relationships were dynamically played out in a society that was gradually understood as patriarchal, racist, and capitalist. In this group of young women, supported by a single teacher at the school, they constructed different intervention possibilities to initiate a counter-hegemonic process alongside other peers within a space surrounded by barriers where ideas were also curbed.

The proposal began with the implementation of workshops with students from the morning shift, very similar to those that Marcia had experienced in the extension project (Silva & Borba, 2018), to discuss topics that the student guild understood to be relevant to the school's reality. The chosen topic for discussion was the exposure of young girls' intimate photos on the Internet and the relationship of these episodes with cases of youth suicide. It is worth noting that the choice of this theme reveals Marcia's ability to apprehend the predominant needs of the school environment, based on the process of self-awareness that the young woman had undergone in the year before, as well as the catharsis and her development as an organic intellectual.

According to the young woman, that workshop was striking as it exposed other young people to the situations that occur daily in the virtual space and involve the school community. It also provided a space for dialogue and exchange among students, allowing them to evaluate each other's attitudes, positions, and how their actions affect others, groups, and society. This workshop was not limited to the school where Marcia studied; workshops were also held in another school in the central region of the city through a partnership between the student councils.

In addition to the school, the university space (UNIFESP Baixada Santista campus) also became more explored by the young woman, becoming more familiar with and fostering a sense of belonging. Some events to which students from her school were invited were organized by the Extension Project. Marcia was always present at these events and identified herself more and more, particularly through discussions and reflections on the role of women and critical analysis regarding patriarchal sociability and its overcoming.

She remembers two events in this direction: a roundtable discussion on rape culture, held after a highly publicized case of a young woman being raped by 33 men (UOL, 2016), as well as a Rap and Funk Battle<sup>6</sup>.

Fortunately, in the year following these events, the Extension Project was able to return to Marcia's school based on new partnerships via a project by an NGO with the Municipal Department of Education of Santos, the Regional Board of Education of the State of São Paulo, and UNIFESP<sup>7</sup>. This project, in turn, aimed to promote integration between student councils and school boards in the public schools of the municipality of Santos to develop actions for the school communities and their respective territories. Approximately 70 students from interested state and municipal schools were brought together, and workshops were conducted to prepare and plan actions for each of the five regions<sup>8</sup> that comprise the city of Santos. These workshops were created and designed by the high-school students themselves (Borba et al., 2017).

This project greatly strengthened the bond with Marcia, as it provided a weekly follow-up with the group in her territory, which involved her school, and was composed of young women who participated in the student council of which she was a member. Thus, we started building a project to be presented at the end of the workshops that would produce something significant for the universe of that territory, those young people, and that school.

The maturation process of the group activities did not only occur in its proposition and creation, it was also perceived in the way the group was conducted, in mediating conflicts, perceiving and accepting the needs and demands of the young people, as well as in coping with situations that require a combination between different institutions and people (Pan, 2019).

In this way, the group went through processes of reconnection, recognition, resignification, and rediscovery, developing a formative process that already had roots. The choice of the young people for the final action was to reactivate the Art Room of the school and organize an Art and Poetry Soiree. They decided to modify the structures of that school to demonstrate the significant sense of belonging and care that those young women had toward that space. This choice, in addition to being meaningful to them, also recognizes the importance of the school as a space for coexistence and sociability.

Alongside the implementation of this project, we initiated the development of this study, in which the young woman not only contributed but also became a member of the research team through a high school research program. This allowed her to become more involved in the activities of the Extension Project, contributing to the development of workshops as a high-school student and researcher. It also provided her with opportunities to learn about scientific practices and, above all, actively participate in the university's everyday life.

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<sup>6</sup>The "Batalha da Silva: Rap and Funk promoting equality" was an event organized by the Extension Project "Youth and Funk in the Baixada Santista: Territories, Networks, Health, and Education" in October 2016 at UNIFESP, Baixada Santista campus, to hold a meeting between young people, university students, and high-school students, using dueling rhymes to express what they thought about the themes: equality between women and men; racial equality; end discrimination against lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, and transsexuals.

<sup>7</sup>Project "Protagonism and Citizenship: A Permanent Construction" developed in Santos by the NGO *Consciência pela Cidadania* in partnership with the Nucleus of Social Public Policies and the Extension Project "Youths and Funk in Baixada Santista: Territories, Networks, Health, and Education", both from UNIFESP.

<sup>8</sup> Beachfront Zone, Intermediate Zone, Hills Zone, Northwest Zone and Continental Area.

Regarding the specific research in which Marcia was involved, she followed up two young people who were chosen based on their life trajectories and their actions in favor of collective causes to operate as organic intellectuals. Throughout our joint fieldwork, after each encounter, we would discuss the relationships observed in the words and actions of those young people, as well as the theoretical framework regarding the construction of organic intellectuals. It was during these moments that we also witnessed Marcia's deepening critical consciousness, aligned with the establishment of an organic relationship with her social class. Beyond learning the scientific methods of conducting interviews and their transcription and systematization, this process allowed her to reframe her worldview and understand the historical and social context of capitalist sociability. Ultimately, it inspired her to set a new aspiration: to attend a public university.

Nevertheless, despite all the difficulties and complexities arising from her everyday life, which included attending school, working at a clothing store, and the household task of taking care of her nephews, Marcia managed to complete the high-school research project. After finishing high school, she enrolled in the *Cardume* Popular Preparatory Course<sup>9</sup> and, the following year, she was admitted to and enrolled in the Social Work Course of a public university, the one in her neighborhood – UNIFESP. This brought joy not only to her but also to the entire team of the university extension program.

In this equation, Marcia collectively transformed so many lives, so many collective spaces, in essence, that impacted her life. For more possibilities of existence like this young girl, for more projects and actions that dialogue with and support these trajectories.

## **Discussion**

This research was designed to delve deeper into discussions about youth from a perspective that truly places young people at the center of their experiences, relationships, anxieties, and experiences. It aimed to explore new possible paths for expanding these perspectives.

Based on the guiding question of this study, we chose to explore the life trajectories of young people starting from their potentialities. These potentialities unfold in the way they perceive the world and how they position and recognize themselves in it, leading to self-transformation, as well as the transformation of their peers and perhaps even the world. We delved into the lives and trajectories of these young people particularly focusing on Marcia's life, which often involved experiences of violence and violations of social and human rights, as well as her processes of pain and joy. This required a continuous effort to build rapport and establish a connection that allowed us to enter her spaces of circulation, whether they were more private-intimate or public, in-person or in virtual realms.

We aimed to explore the experiences observed during the journey of this young woman who, in a counter-hegemonic movement, was constituting herself as an organic intellectual (Gramsci, 2000) through processes of social transformation, toward human emancipation and the struggle for the hegemony of an alternative societal project

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<sup>9</sup> A project of the UNIFESP Baixada Santista campus that offers socially vulnerable young people and adults the opportunity to prepare for the National High-School Examination (ENEM) and enter public and private universities. The project is free and uses Popular Education as a methodology based on a Freirean perspective.

different from that imposed by the ruling class. Based on empirical evidence, this occurred gradually through Marcia's role as a multiplier, organizing and coordinating workshops for other young people, as well as experiencing intellectual growth within a public university that initially seemed inaccessible to her.

In this process, it is worth highlighting the reactivation of the school student council, contextualized within a broader movement that emerged in 2015 and became nationally known as the "Occupations". This movement was a response by students, supported by teachers, against the proposal of the government of the state of São Paulo to reorganize high-school education. The proposal involved the closure of numerous classrooms and schools, making it more difficult for students to access education as they would have to travel to more distant neighborhoods. This movement prompted young people to question the role of student councils and the coordination among students to ensure access to education. It also advanced the discussion on the quality of the education provided and how disconnected schools were from their surroundings and the demands of young people (Silveira & Groppo, 2019).

In addition, the insertion of the young woman in the PIBIC-EM is pointed out. Unfortunately, there are few studies addressing the impact of this type of scientific research program aimed at high-school students (Heck et al., 2012; Oliveira & Bianchetti, 2019). The idea of this program and its existence are valuable in bridging the gap between high-school students and public universities. However, in the context of the devaluation of science that we are experiencing in Brazil, this program ends up not being a viable option for young people from lower-income classes. The monthly scholarship of BRL 100.00 does not meet the basic needs of these students, effectively making the program exclusive and elitist, contrary to its initial intention of assisting those facing greater challenges in accessing the education system.

With Marcia's increasing participation in the activities of the Extension Project, there was a simultaneous deepening of critical readings of her reality, especially regarding issues that intersect with femininity, violence, and youth. This was evident in how she related to and positioned herself among her peers, as well as in her statements and speeches. As Jacinto (2017) suggests, there is a movement between the world conception and the historical-social context, seeking to motivate organizational forms that enable revolutionary action to unfold (Jacinto, 2017, p. 79). These conversations transitioned from the "protected" spaces of the workshops to everyday school life, and particularly to the virtual realm.

Indeed, a key element in understanding this process was the use of the virtual space, particularly social media, as a means of expression, as exemplified in the story surrounding the girls' use of leggings. In this sense, we corroborate the assertion in Barreiro (2019) that virtual reality shapes and defines ways of life, particularly among young people, and as such, it becomes impossible to separate virtual reality from physical reality, as they constantly feed into each other.

The virtual space also plays a significant role in the young woman's relationship with the school, particularly regarding the exposure of intimate photos and videos, commonly referred to as "sexting", which became the theme of a workshop she conducted with other young people at school. This exposure gained momentum

with the increased use of online resources, leading to various consequences such as the overexposure of young people's privacy and cyberbullying<sup>10</sup>. Several researchers have comprehensively addressed these issues, reporting a significant increase in psychosocial distress among young people related to self-harming behaviors, suicidal ideation, and suicide as a result of being victims of these practices, thereby highlighting other forms of violence that now occur through virtual means (Ferreira & Deslandes, 2018).

Marcia's engagement with the University, through the different projects mentioned, contributed to the pursuit of her dream and more. Alongside that, her political activism within the school, the student council, and on social media is also very prominent. From a Gramscian perspective, it is in these spaces and situations that catharses occurred, effective processes of transforming not only individuals but also the collective reality (Gramsci, 2000). As a result, Marcia became an organic intellectual, someone who, after going through the catharsis process, is capable of fostering cathartic processes within her class group (Gramsci, 1991).

Moving away from a discourse of youth protagonism that aims to maintain a hegemonic thought with adults as the central figure (Souza, 2006), the movement observed by the young people in this study, as materialized in the life narratives, seems to have been constructed on the margins of this reproduction, in the gaps, to empower young people. It is seen as an alternative in the face of the appropriation of the "youth protagonism" discourse by different institutions—whether NGOs, political parties, or even the State through public policies—intended to co-opt youth in favor of a discourse that strengthens their ideological apparatuses and thus reinforces hegemonic thinking and the reproduction of social relations in favor of the ruling class (Boutin & Flach, 2016).

It is from an adult-centric discourse, affirmed in a perspective of "protagonism", that young people remain the target of violence and on the margins of public policies, prioritizing conceptions that aim to mitigate or appease inequalities, but not to overcome them (Boutin & Flach, 2016). Forged spaces are built for these young people to occupy, without their effective participation to validate what truly makes sense in their lives and trajectories, in their desires, interests, experiences, and potentialities (Souza, 2006).

On the other hand, it is possible, through the explicitation of this youth trajectory and to answer the central question of this study, to establish evidence of the possibility of creating spaces that can foster organic intellectuals and cathartic processes in two interconnected movements: offering experiences (actions and content) for young people to build their repertoire of criticism regarding their specific reality and mechanisms to confront it; supporting actions that they can develop with their peers, multiplying knowledge and sharing worldviews.

In conclusion, the sharing of our trajectories transformed Marcia and, equally, transformed us. At the same time, it impacted many other lives that emerged from the collective spaces she entered: the School, the Student Council, the Art Room, the Poetry Soiree, the Extension Project, the Cardume Popular Preparatory Course, and finally, the University.

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<sup>10</sup> Psychological and systematic violence between peers that occurs in the virtual environment and relies on technological tools of interaction.

In a dialectical movement, there was a continuous transit between the collective and the individual spheres, between the powerful ability to transform oneself and to transform others, whether they be individuals or groups, in-person or virtual.

## **Conclusion**

Ensuring and supporting the existence of spaces for the voice and listening of this young woman—and the other three who participated in this study—as a methodological resource fostered the construction of narratives not only with their collaboration but through joint composition. This approach allowed us to explore beyond their scars and, more importantly, the strategies and openings in their lived experiences, enabling us to recognize the emergence of the organic intellectual in Gramsci within these trajectories.

To achieve this, we chose, as a methodological experience, individual territorial follow-ups supported by the social occupational therapy framework. This approach effectively provided us with a greater and more comprehensive understanding of these young people as social subjects, starting from the assumption that they are the ones who narrate their own stories through what truly matters to them. They became collaborators in the process of analyzing and constructing narratives, allowing us to remember and reflect on their trajectories. Furthermore, beyond “narrating” and “telling”, this methodological premise allowed us to build more spaces of sociability together with the young people, aiming to foster political agency and provide them with more tools to confront the various vulnerabilities that surround their lives.

Indeed, this approach to conducting research, closely linked to university extension activities, instills a sense of intervention among researchers. It is through this process that knowledge production is enhanced, just as the lives of young people become strengthened in the face of adversity. Not only do the researchers benefit from this experience, but they also become more ethically committed to these lives.

Hence, we emphasize the importance of the university extension experience in shaping this analysis, particularly in terms of the methodology of peer exchange between the university and high-school students. It is through this relationship, based on the principles of horizontal exchange of knowledge, experiences, and understanding, that the bonds necessary for this study were created and nurtured. It is from this perspective and experience that we can see these young people as actors, active participants, and social subjects. Moreover, we highlight the potentiality of this study lies in the methodological scope of what is understood as “collaborative research”. The young collaborator was not merely a provider of her history for subsequent analysis, she was also a co-author/co-producer of the emerging knowledge. The construction and analysis were created together in a dialectical process.

Therefore, this study proposes, based on a theoretical analysis of authors who share this perspective, an alternative way of understanding these young people, in which they are seen as central agents in the construction of their own spaces of interest and transformation. This work emerged from our interest in the life histories of young people, as well as the people, situations, and contexts that have contributed to shaping them into more socially active subjects, following a Gramscian perspective. These young people can be seen as the seeds of organic intellectuals who play a crucial role in societal change.

In conclusion, it is projected that this study can provide references for strategies to strengthen youth networks and reposition the school as a central and meaningful institution in their lives. It aims to accumulate the necessary conditions for collectively confronting the vulnerabilities that surround the everyday life of young people, empowering them to become true agents of change. By recognizing their role as intellectuals, organic intellectuals, this study seeks to enable a reading that places these subjects within the realm of concrete intervention and action.

One limitation of this study and a potential area for further exploration is the understanding of the impact of Brazilian social protection policies dedicated to young people within the context of these experiences and processes that occur in the gaps. It is expected that new research can be produced and deepened from this perspective, providing objective and subjective contributions to develop new public policies that recognize young people as social subjects. This calls for the creation of a different school and a different university that acknowledge and empower young people as active participants in shaping their own lives.

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### Author's Contributions

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