

Experience Report

The educational dimension in the praxis of social occupational therapy with young people from urban popular groups

A dimensão educativa na práxis da terapia ocupacional social junto a jovens de grupos populares urbanos

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Abstract

Taking popular participation and democracy—both in the micro and macro spheres—as an ideal of society, offering spaces for learning the “skills” that ensure these processes is essential. From a broad understanding of education, taking Paulo Freire as a reference, this text reflects on an educational dimension in the praxis of social occupational therapy. To this end, it relied on a brief experience report developed by the METUIA/UFSCar center with young people from urban popular groups and the management and technical team of a Youth Center in the municipality of São Carlos, state of São Paulo, Brazil. For six months, Workshops of Activities, Dynamics and Projects were developed with these young people, and meetings were conducted with this team to discuss the nature of this space, its possibilities of use, and its rules. These workshops and meetings revealed the existing conflicts between the young people and the team, and discussions about strategies to face these situations were proposed. The recognition of an educational character in/of social occupational therapy practices is advocated through the promotion of dialogue and awareness, aiming at social participation and the exercise of citizenship.

Keywords: Occupational Therapy; Education; Citizenship; Social Participation.

Resumo

Tomando a participação popular e a democracia — tanto nas esferas micro como na macrossocial — como ideal de sociedade, considera-se imprescindível a oferta de espaços para o aprendizado de “habilidades” que garantam esses processos. Partindo de uma ampla compreensão sobre educação, tomando como referência Paulo Freire, o texto propõe refletir sobre uma dimensão educativa na práxis da

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terapia ocupacional social. Para tanto, utiliza-se de um breve relato de experiência desenvolvida pelo núcleo METUIA/UFSCar junto a jovens de grupos populares urbanos e à equipe gestora e técnica em um Centro da Juventude na cidade de São Carlos - SP. Ao longo de um semestre, foram desenvolvidas Oficinas de Atividades, Dinâmicas e Projetos com os/as jovens e reuniões com a equipe para discutir a natureza do espaço, suas possibilidades de uso e suas regras. Os encontros com os grupos explicitaram conflitos existentes entre os/as jovens frequentadores(as) e a equipe, e a partir deles foram propostas discussões sobre estratégias de enfrentamento da situação. Defende-se o reconhecimento de um caráter educativo nas/das práticas de terapia ocupacional social à medida que se colocam, por meio da promoção do diálogo e da conscientização, ao fomento da participação social e do exercício de cidadania.

Palavras-chave: Terapia Ocupacional; Educação; Cidadania; Participação Social.

Introduction

Productions in the area of occupational therapy that, at some level, take the educator Paulo Freire as a reference, have increased in Brazil, especially among authors who seek more critical perspectives to understand the profession and its relationship with subjects and social groups (Farias et al., 2016; Lopes & Malfitano, 2016; Malfitano et al., 2014; Gontijo & Santiago, 2018; Farias & Lopes, 2020, 2022).

Considering occupational therapists as social agents who, in their professional practice, always convey knowledge and values, even if implicitly (Medeiros, 2010), We present an experience report in social occupational therapy with young people from urban popular groups, seeking to discuss the extent to which this technical action is capable of placing, under a perspective that is liberating and promotes social transformation, an educational dimension according to the precepts advocated by Freire (1979).

Although Freire's writings are fundamentally focused on discussions in the field of education and teaching practice, he emphasizes that education alone is not capable of transforming the world, despite being a fundamental element. In this sense, it can be considered that Freire's elaborations, properly contextualized, contribute to problematizing the social practices developed by different professionals aiming at social transformation.

We could argue that the actuality of Freire's thought contemplates the area of occupational therapy by putting on the screen the need for criticality and the possibility of transforming the world and social reality from the perspective of people. Indeed, this interests us very much; however, our first convergences with the author's thoughts (Freire, 1979) are earlier: the transformation of reality becomes desirable precisely for the world to be a more possible and better place for all people, especially for those in situations of oppression.

When working with individuals and social groups who, for different reasons (social, physical, sensory, cognitive, psychological, among others), have difficulties

participating in social life (Barros et al., 2007), occupational therapy stands on the side of the oppressed, to whom the effective exercise of citizenship has historically been denied.

Thus, it must be admitted that “the issue of education and knowledge of occupational therapists permeates [...] a social clash, since it exists through and for social intervention...” (Medeiros, 2010, p. 45), “toward emancipation and the rescue of rights” (Soares, 2007, p. 8).

Thus, throughout the historical constitution of the area in Brazil, occupational therapists began to understand the social role of the profession by questioning “...how their function is determined by the logic of the organization in which they are included and by the assumptions established in the other instances of decision and power” (Medeiros, 2010, p. 141).

Although occupational therapy, as an area of study, is based, in the Brazilian context, on the critical understanding of the social reality and the crossings of social inequality in the possibilities of participation of various vulnerable groups, it is with the formation of what we now call the sub-area of social occupational therapy that dialogue with theoretical-methodological frameworks closer to the human and social sciences began (Lopes & Malfitano, 2016), seeking to subsidize a practice aimed at the attention of subjects, individual and collective, subordinated, in processes of rupture of social support networks, in the micro and macro social perspectives (Lopes, 2016).

The dynamism of the elements with which the dialogue is proposed imposes a dynamic of constant theoretical deepening on the subarea. In this direction, on the one hand, it is taken as a principle what Farias & Lopes (2020) developed around Freire’s elaborations as a theoretical framework for social occupational therapy, especially around the concepts of education as a practice of freedom, dialogue, and awareness, and on the other hand, combined with this idea and based on an understanding of social participation that is consistent with the understanding of Silva & Oliver (2019, p. 2), that is,

[...] social participation is the involvement of subjects in social groups and/or in public and community spaces to transform everyday life and living conditions marked by illness, violence, mental and/or psychic suffering, social and occupational injustice, inequality, prejudice, exclusion, and oppression.

The aim here is to guide the discussion of an educational dimension of social occupational therapy practice aimed at the exercise of citizenship and this social participation.

Education as a Social Action Dimension

According to Freire (2001), education permeates—or should permeate—all social action, not being restricted to teachers. Although the social roles of teachers and educators are often taken interchangeably, they are different.

Teachers, as people qualified to teach specific content in their field, are promoters of the teaching and learning process through teaching education. According to Schram & Carvalho (2007), teachers are the professionals responsible for facilitating access to knowledge historically elaborated by the cultural construction of humanity. Educators,

according to Freire (2001), are intellectuals, and their task is expanded when thinking of their action as an essentially political act that must go beyond mere facilitation.

These tasks should not overlap in the evaluative sense, that is, one should not assume a prominent role to the detriment of the other; rather, both should be harmonized and united, because, according to Freire (1979), the political action cannot do without science or technology, since this knowledge is a valuable instrument to better fight for the proposed causes. Therefore, the effort to emphasize the pedagogical contents of formal education—the teacher’s role—should be associated with the reflective effort based on the political and social issues of the environment – the educator’s role.

The distinction between pedagogical practice and educational practice points to two different exercises in objective; however, being a teacher and being an educator, in a Freirean perspective, should be inseparable aspects, although they are, in principle, independent.

Thus, it becomes possible—and desirable—for teachers to assume an educational role in their professional practice; however, a more careful approach to Freire’s precepts allows us to admit that the opposite is not necessarily true: pedagogical qualification is not necessary to become an educator in the world.

Freire presents the educational task as a skill of human beings who, “[...] the more they critically reflect on their existence and the more they act on it, the more human they will be [...]” (Freire, 1979, p. 33).

According to Freire (1979), education is a daily exercise of mutuality, an exercise of awareness of the world and of oneself in the world. Thus, this process of awareness that education can foster is part of the humanization process, as it makes it possible to go beyond apprehending reality to appreciate it critically.

As an assumption of the educational task, in addition to raising awareness as a critical and dialogic exercise for a better understanding of social reality, Freire (1996) also defines it as instrumentalization to interfere in this reality. Therefore, education also reveals itself as a social action, fundamental for the exercise of autonomy and the construction of a democratic society, with the possibility of assuming an emancipatory character, according to him, as a “practice of freedom” (Freire, 1996).

Thus, since education is a social action, it is possible to reflect on the educational dimension present in social actions. Not that the educational dimension is considered as something innate in all social action, but it is relevant to stick to the possibility that social action, adopting a critical perspective, is committed to freedom, autonomy, and human and political emancipation of social subjects and, thus, it can be educational.

In this direction, we propose here to discuss a specific social action: the practice of occupational therapists and the reflection on to what extent an educational component is present in their professional action, especially in the sub-area of social occupational therapy. Far from the pretense of taking on a work that is not ours – the pedagogical task of formal education, here we take an exercise of reflection on our practice, as a measure of care to maintain its orientation toward a transforming praxis (Freire, 1996).

Praxis as a Principle for Social Occupational Therapy

Freire (1987) defines praxis as one's action in the world that aims to transform it. Praxis would be the inseparability between theory and practice, the union between what is done and what is thought about what it is done, in a movement of action-reflection in search of transformation.

The praxis of occupational therapists as social workers is a powerful facilitator of the exercise of citizenship and access to the rights arising from it, as well as a promoter of autonomy experience (Lopes & Silva, 2007).

Thus, it must be admitted that “[...] the issue of education and knowledge of occupational therapists permeates [...] a social clash since it exists through and for social intervention...” (Medeiros, 2010, p. 45).

For Freire (1996), this is the challenge of social workers who are committed to their action: to act and reflect with the different Others they work with to make each other aware of the real difficulties of their society. Thus, the commitment of these professionals to society implies acting and reflecting, which, in turn, implies a constant demand to expand the knowledge that can subsidize this action aiming to transform reality, that is, do the praxis.

It is important to highlight this need to implement the practice presented by the author himself (Freire, 1979) because it goes beyond the generic commitment of any human being (to make more of oneself and of the world) and qualifies the commitment assumed when being a professional (fostering action and reflection on reality).

As professional commitment implies knowledge about reality to support its transformation, it is necessarily a praxis and, therefore, it is not a passive act; for Freire (1987), this incurs the demand for constant improvement to overcome specialism and a naive view of reality.

Amid this discussion, although many occupational therapy subareas that have been constituted since then have sought to mobilize and commit themselves to a transformative practice, it is with social occupational therapy that the debate on the need for actions combined with social participation—toward a praxis aimed at the exercise of citizenship and the rights arising from it—is included in the agenda of the area (Lopes, 2016), with a strong influence of Freirean ideas (Farias & Lopes, 2020).

The Educational Dimension in Social Occupational Therapy Practice

Since the Metuia Project was created in 1998, it has fostered the theoretical-methodological foundation of social occupational therapy in its different network centers. The METUIA/UFSCar Center has focused on and accumulated experiences, mainly with adolescents and young people ¹ from urban popular groups, and has been seeking to mobilize reflections based on the notion of citizenship and the rights and duties arising from it (Lopes, 2016).

¹ We will use young people instead of youth as a way of demarcating the constituent plurality of the same social group; it is believed that, by valuing differences, it is possible to promote better conditions to understand the different realities and specificities of this group, to build more assertive public proposals (Dayrell, 2003; Pais, 1993).

Since 2005, actions have been developed in the municipality of São Carlos, state of São Paulo, focusing on a peripheral region of the city, where there is great social vulnerability (Pereira, 2012), in a proposal that aims to expand and strengthen social support networks, possibilities of building expanded perspectives for the future, and organization of groups, envisioning the construction of full citizenship (Lopes et al., 2013).

From this accumulation of experiences, we present a brief report of an occupational-therapeutic intervention conducted by the METUIA/UFSCar Center to exemplify how the educational dimension is clarified in the praxis of social occupational therapy and to support the deepening of the reflections proposed here.

Since 2008, one of the focal points for the development of actions at the METUIA/UFSCar Center in the municipality has been its first Youth Center.

The Youth Centers were proposed by the Ministry of Social Security and Social Assistance through Ordinance No. 879 of 2001, which includes information, sport, and culture as guidelines for the functioning of these spaces, which were later incorporated as social equipment of the network of basic social protection, in the booklet “Technical Guidelines of the Social Assistance Reference Center” (Brasil, 2009) Ministry of Social Development, Assistance, Family and Fight against Hunger (Barreiro, 2014).

The process of recognizing young people in Brazil is quite recent. It began with the association of this social group with a “problem” to be solved by social assistance services. Only more recently, as of the 2000s, progress has been made in recognizing young people as a social group with specific rights (Sposito, 2007; Barreiro & Malfitano, 2017).

The institution of the Youth Centers followed the same logic as the construction of public policies aimed at young people in Brazil. It is believed that the fact that these centers were proposed from the Social Assistance sector brings important repercussions on how they are figured today, such as, for example, their emphasis on socially vulnerable young people. In this sense, Barreiro & Malfitano (2017) point out that the practices carried out in services aimed at young people are still marked by the presence of a social class profile and, not infrequently, by a welfare bias, stirring up a political-ideological dispute of young people as a “problem” category or as subjects of rights. The limits and difficulties in the process of recognizing young people as subjects of rights affect their effective possibility of social participation since the recognition of a group or social subject is preceded by their possibility of winning the public arena and participating in it, that is, achieving a place of influence and sociability that makes it possible to raise tensions to place their demands and referrals (Arendt, 2007).

Thus, idealizing “[...] a space for participation and protagonism of young people, in search of access to services and the construction of citizenship for and by this group [...]” (Lopes et al., 2008, p. 5), in 2008, when the municipal management was preparing for the opening of the Youth Center, the METUIA/UFSCar Center was invited to collaborate to the preparation of its Political Pedagogical Project (Marinho & Lopes, 2019) because of its experience with young people, especially in the development of actions with this group in the region where the aforementioned social equipment would be installed.

Designed, in principle, for leisure and coexistence of poor young people on the outskirts of São Carlos, from the beginning, the actions developed in that place by the METUIA/UFSCar Center have sought the appropriation of the space by the young people who frequent it; the aim is not just a place for young people, but of young people. However, how to build a space for young people and with young people if this space does not prioritize this population (Marinho & Lopes, 2019) and the boys and girls who frequent it do not recognize themselves in it, they do not recognize the space as belonging to them and, above all, they do not recognize it as their right?

Since its idealization, one of the challenges of that Youth Center has been to move toward making it a reference and coexistence space for young people, including their plurality. This challenge, historically, has generated tensions and conflicts between the team and those who frequent the space and, in the face of it, the METUIA/UFSCar Laboratory team has undertaken actions to encourage the creation of belonging spaces that make it possible, together with activities and coexistence, to develop that equipment as a reference for adolescents and young people from urban popular groups in the southern region of the municipality of São Carlos, seeking to strengthen it as a public space (Silva, 2019) focusing on the universalization of citizenship rights (Lopes & Silva, 2007).

From the time invested there, it was possible to notice that the conflicts resulted, in large part, from ignorance of the social function of the Youth Center both by the target population and its staff. While the young people oscillated between complete absence and intense presence in space, accompanied by the verbalization that they were in charge of the “chacrinha” (as the Youth Center is affectionately called by its regulars) and, therefore, they could do whatever they wanted with it, the staff—without understanding that population and the propositions of the Youth Center—in a short time went from disclaiming responsibility to extreme control, from assistance to the denial of rights.

This understanding was taken as the basis for the proposal to encourage exchanges between the staff and the young people, seeking to build understandings that, in the impossibility of being univocal, could be negotiated, producing something in common, with the potential to coexist and respect each other. Thus, the idea of collectively revising/building the rules that would govern the functioning of the Youth Center arose, understanding that, through this process, it would be possible to make the meaning of these rules viable – since they were/are important for the functioning of the space, favoring that they were respected/fulfilled.

Therefore, the work carried out there before the pandemic² was developed under two main aspects: 1) “direct investment”, with actions aimed at young people for the (re)cognition of their rights as citizens and, more particularly, as young people; 2) “indirect investment”, with actions aimed at young people by seeking to qualify the local staff to work and deal with young people.

² This caveat is important because, after more than two years of suspension of activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the weakening of contact with the regulars and the change in management, the present moment (re)places the group with new demands, including the need to resume the exercise presented here.

1) The “direct investment”

As the participation of those young people in the space was (and still is) quite limited, either in the possibility of free circulation or in the possibility of dialogue, action, and intervention in it, as highlighted by Pereira (2012), the METUIA/UFSCar Center has produced actions aiming to promote access and use of that social equipment by young people, something that, although it has been among the objectives of the project since its creation, is still fragile.

In this sense, aiming for the Youth Center to become a reference and coexistence space for young people, efforts were made to promote protected spaces for coexistence by offering Workshops of Activities, Dynamics, and Projects (Lopes et al., 2014). These Workshops seek to produce critical-reflexive discussions about the democratization of spaces and social equipment, favoring the experimentation of places of sociability that go beyond the physical space of the workshop to the living spaces of the participating individuals (Silva, 2019). The main purpose of the Workshops in the period reported here was to discuss the rules of that place, understanding that the process of joint construction (between young people and the staff), in addition to valuing different types of knowledge, had the power to attribute meanings to the construction of agreements, leading to other ways of relating with the others present there, with the space itself, and with the rules that assist in constituting the local everyday life.

According to Freire (1996, p. 24), valuing these different types of knowledge consists of the process of educating, which “[...] is not transferring knowledge, but creating possibilities for its production or construction”. In the Freirean theory, dialogue and the practice of dialogicity are also highlighted to establish communication in the most genuine sense of the word. Therefore, dialogue that favors educational processes and only occurs through the availability to listen, is a fundamental means for building horizontal relationships (Freire, 1996) – a fundamental aspect adopted as a guiding principle of social occupational therapy practice (Farias & Lopes, 2020).

An interesting point to analyze throughout this process is the development of this dialogicity. In the beginning, the willingness of young people to listen was centered, to a large extent, on the figure of the occupational therapist, demonstrating their concepts regarding who has the power to speak and/or who is the holder of knowledge – postures that did not favor communication between all those involved and the construction of a democratic space. It was necessary to carry out a deconstruction work with the young people about this group functioning, through experimentation with other possible ways of being in the space and the relationships, fostering a space where everyone could speak, listen, and make collective decisions (Silva, 2019). In these experiences, we also sought that, through the triggered discussions, critical reflection and awareness would be possible, taken according to Freire (1979) and as objectives of social occupational therapy action (Farias & Lopes, 2020); in this specific case, of themselves as subjects of rights.

Thus, at the end of May and beginning of June 2015, the METUIA/UFSCar Center, in agreement with the coordination of the Youth Center, carried out activities and dynamics to discuss with the young regulars the rules and collective agreements for better functioning of the space.

Over four meetings, with an average participation of 30 young people, debates and surveys were conducted seeking to know their perceptions and demands for the space, their main complaints regarding its functioning, the activities that they liked the most among those already existing or even those they would like to have in that space, in addition to the rules that the young people thought were necessary, to foster other dialogues between the staff and the regulars in the mediation of the collective construction of the space and the relationships that permeated its use.

2) The “indirect investment”

Aiming to help the Youth Center team to enhance the service and dynamics of the internal (staff) and external (development in an intersectoral network of care and assistance to adolescents and young people) work, and the adoption of the democratic principle as a guide for actions, we proposed dialogic meetings with the team.

Initially, the proposal of the Pedagogical Political Project of the Youth Center was recalled and the need for its (re)cognition to face proposals that could mischaracterize that equipment was highlighted; in theory, this would strengthen the staff, including the dialogue with the young regulars, about the possible uses of that space, also implying the discussion of its rules.

However, we encountered numerous challenges, such as a shortage of human resources to maintain the space and activities and a very rigid view of the uses and functioning considered adequate for the Youth Center. Shedding light on the issue of democratization of the space gradually showed the need to sensitize the staff to deal with the regulars. Thus, for a semester, monthly meetings were held with the staff to continue this discussion and reflect together on the management and subsidies for the better functioning of the space.

The process involved, on the one hand, a reflective exercise by the staff on the need to value everyone’s knowledge and to signify with the young people the construction of agreements, in the understanding that this could enable the production of respect and, on the other hand, with young people, the recognition that their participation goes far beyond the use of the space.

It is believed that the struggle for the democratization of that space is not constituted “only” as a local, punctual intervention; rather, it comes amid the struggle for the provision, expansion, and/or adequacy of public services to young people, in a broader sense, and for poor young people, more specifically, through the recognition of their place as subjects of rights.

This experience report reveals a “dominated” social participation, or even the non-participation of young people in that space, in theory, destined for them. When problematizing the lack of participation experience of the population in public affairs, Freire (1967) defined this condition as “democratic inexperience”. According to Freire, this participation limitation (Freire, 1987) shows the need for critical inclusion of people in democratization processes and, therefore, is an aspect/object subject to reflection for/of educational practice.

Final Remarks

This experience report reveals an aspect that is still very common regarding the reality of young people: the limitation of their space for participation, in a cycle of vulnerability and exclusion that feeds back (Acioli & Souza, 2011). In this context, the need for social discussion regarding the access of this population(s) to the various social spaces and their effective possibility of participation is evident, forwarding to/in the democratic public arena the demands for their recognition and participation (Novaes, 2011) aimed at their involvement, as highlighted earlier by Silva & Oliver (2019), in search of the transformation of their everyday lives and living conditions.

Thus, the perspective of the need to engage in the realization of the Youth Center reported in this text, in our perspective, converges with the understanding of education as a practice of freedom, as it motivates a group to organize itself to acquire power (Shor & Freire, 1986).

In a more micro-social dimension, the following can be said of the strategy of raising awareness of the existing and concretely expressed conflicts between the young people who frequent the Youth Center and its staff as a starting point to then collectively build coping strategies and propositions of changes for the identified situation: lack of understanding about the space, its rules, and its possibilities of use.

We believe that, in experiences like this, occupational therapists also assume the role of educators, providing subjects with experimentation and reflection that there are other ways of relating as citizens and holders of social rights.

As simple as this experience report might be, we believe in its potential to bring to the scene the negotiation experience for the joint construction of answers to a collective question, in the sharing and exchange of knowledge (Farias & Lopes, 2020) and in the recognition and legitimation of the exercise of citizenship and social participation of specific groups whose effectiveness is faced with several obstacles (Lopes & Malfitano, 2016).

It is believed that this experience is educational in the combination of these micro and macro-social dimensions, as by placing itself as a critical reflection beyond the awareness of the local reality, of living with and in the Youth Center, it will “disclose truths hidden by dominant ideologies” (Farias & Lopes, 2020, p. 1354) that are manifested in social reality through the insufficiency and fragmentation of actions and public policies aimed at young people (Sposito & Carrano, 2003).

Nevertheless, in addition to making visible the social aspects that limit ways of being in the world, the work is also projected with an educational facet as it undertakes the task of announcing possibilities to change this reality or, in Freirean terms, to change the world, in the struggle for democracy and the conquest of citizenship rights (Lopes, 1999, 2016), toward the anti-oppression of freedom (Farias & Lopes, 2022).

Finally, we believe in the importance of this reflective exercise on the educational character of social occupational therapy practices in rescuing the social commitment that we project with our professional practice so that we can design actions committed to the liberation of subaltern subjects and groups (Freire, 1979; Farias & Lopes, 2020),

engendering social processes and proposing and developing social technologies that can contribute to the continuous and historical struggle for a more just or less unequal society.

If popular participation and democracy, both in the micro and macro spheres, are our ideal of society, it is essential that we offer spaces for learning the “skills” needed for this exercise and also equip ourselves to seek improvement of our educational process as technicians.

As Paulo Freire said, there is a need to believe in human beings and, from our point of view, to believe especially in our young people.

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Author's Contributions

Marina Jorge da Silva developed the experience report. Marina Jorge da Silva and Livia Celegati Pan contributed to the study design, writing and revision of the text, and approved the final version of this text.

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