

Pessoa, A. S. G. Coimbra, R. M. Murgó, C. S. Breda, A. V. Baker, A. Resilience processes of Brazilian young people: overcoming adversity through an arts program

## **Resilience processes of Brazilian young people: overcoming adversity through an arts program**

### **Processos de resiliência de adolescentes brasileiros: enfrentamento de adversidades utilizando um programa de artes**

### **Procesos de resiliencia de adolescentes brasileños: enfrentamiento de adversidades a través de un programa de artes**

Alex Sandro Gomes Pessoa<sup>1</sup>

Renata Maria Coimbra<sup>2</sup>

Camélia Santana Murgó<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Adrian Van Breda<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Alison Baker<sup>5</sup>

#### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes aspects of the process of resilience in the lives of young people who are exposed to psychosocial risk in the Brazilian context. The reflections presented are grounded in the experience of a youth service that provides art activities, within a milieu of civic engagement and social participation. Through the use of arts pedagogies, this youth service aims to create emancipatory dynamics and disrupt oppressive social structures for young Brazilians experiencing disadvantage. Using a qualitative approach, namely interviews and a focus group, with six young people who had graduated from the youth service, we identified five themes that were associated with the youths' resilience and the role of the arts and the youth service in their lives. The findings provide a better understanding of the trajectories

---

<sup>1</sup> Psicólogo (Unoeste). Licenciado em Educação Física. Mestre e doutor em Educação pela Universidade Estadual Paulista (Unesp). Pós-doutor em Psicologia pela Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). Docente do Departamento de Psicologia e do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia da Universidade Federal de São Carlos (UFSCar).

<sup>2</sup> Especialização (MBA em Cinema-Documentário) pela Fundação Getúlio Vargas, São Paulo (2012-2014). Doutorado em Psicologia escolar e do desenvolvimento humano pela Universidade de São Paulo (USP) em 2003. Pós-doutorado na área da Sociologia da Infância, realizado no IEC – Universidade do Minho. Pós-doutorado na Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canadá. Atualmente realiza Pós-doutorado com o título "Figurações da Violência Sexual" na área de Comunicação Social (Cinema-documentário) na Fafich da UFMG.

<sup>3</sup> Graduação e licenciatura em Psicóloga pela Universidade do Sagrado Coração (1997). Mestrado em Psicologia Escolar (2002). Doutorado em Psicologia Ciência e Profissão (2005) pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas. Pós-doutoramento em Avaliação Psicológica pela Universidade São Francisco (2009-2013).

<sup>4</sup> Doctorate in Social Work (RAU, 2004). Professor of Social Work at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Contact: [adrian@vanbreda.org](mailto:adrian@vanbreda.org)

<sup>5</sup> PhD (North Carolina State University). MS (North Carolina State University). BA (University of Memphis). Senior Lecturer of Social Pedagogy at Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia.

Contact: [alison.baker@vu.edu.au](mailto:alison.baker@vu.edu.au)

Pessoa, A. S. G. Coimbra, R. M. Murgu, C. S. Breda, A. V. Baker, A. Resilience processes of brazilian young people: overcoming adversity through an arts program

of resilience and the contribution of participation in a youth service, as well as the personal significance that arts can provide for young people exposed to vulnerable contexts.

**Keywords:** Young people. Resilience. Art. Youth service.

### **Resumo**

Este artigo analisa processos de resiliência na vida de adolescentes expostos a indicadores de risco psicossocial presentes no contexto brasileiro. As reflexões apresentadas foram formuladas a partir das experiências de uma instituição que oferece atividades artísticas, visando ao engajamento cívico e à participação social dos adolescentes. Por intermédio da pedagogia da arte, esta instituição objetiva criar dinâmicas emancipatórias e romper com estruturas sociais opressivas para adolescentes brasileiros que estão em situação de exclusão. A partir de uma abordagem de investigação qualitativa, que utilizou entrevistas e grupo focal com seis adolescentes que passaram pela instituição, identificamos cinco temáticas que foram associadas a processos de resiliência dos adolescentes e o papel que as artes e a instituição ocuparam em suas vidas. Os resultados forneceram uma compreensão mais aprofundada sobre as trajetórias de resiliência, bem como revelou os sentidos pessoais positivos que as artes podem trazer na vida de adolescentes expostos a contextos vulneráveis.

**Palavras-chave:** Adolescentes. Resiliência. Artes. Instituição.

### **Resumen**

Este artículo analiza procesos de resiliencia en la vida de adolescentes expuestos a indicadores de riesgo psicossocial presentes en el contexto brasileño. Las reflexiones presentadas fueron formuladas a partir de las experiencias de una institución que ofrece actividades artísticas, buscando el compromiso cívico y la participación social de los adolescentes. Por intermedio de la pedagogía del arte, esta institución objetiva crear dinámicas emancipatorias y romper con estructuras sociales opresivas para adolescentes brasileños que están en situación de exclusión. A partir de un enfoque de investigación cualitativa, que empleó el uso de entrevistas y grupo focal, con seis adolescentes que pasaron por la institución, identificamos cinco temáticas que se asociaron a procesos de resiliencia de los adolescentes y el papel que las artes y la institución ocuparon en sus vidas. Los resultados proporcionaron una comprensión más profunda sobre las trayectorias de resiliencia, así como reveló los sentidos personales positivos que las artes pueden traer en la vida de adolescentes expuestos a contextos vulnerables.

**Palabras clave:** Adolescentes. Resiliencia. Artes. Institución.

## Background

The concept of resilience has been explored extensively in recent decades by researchers in the humanities and social sciences from a range of countries. This interest has produced substantial variation in explanatory models of resilience, including those anchored in human development, psychology and education, and has been informed by practice in varying contexts of vulnerability (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014).

In general, resilience has been understood as the ability of individuals to overcome adversity and the capacity to mobilize psychological resources that can ensure positive adaptation in the face of misfortunes in life (Rutter, 1987; Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013; Yunes, 2013). Thus, resilience theory argues that resilience processes emerge only in the presence of risk factors to psychosocial development and serve to facilitate positive adaptation or 'better-than-expected' outcomes (Southwick *et al.*, 2014).

The literature suggests that risk factors are characterized as events or situations that, when present in the life history of subjects, impinge on their development, resulting in actions contrary to healthy psychosocial functioning, including well-being and self-esteem (Dell'Aglia & Koller, 2011; Edinburgh, Garcia, Harpin, & Saewyc, 2013). Conversely, protective factors are understood as any resources that can assist in overcoming adversity and which allow individuals to maintain aspects of mental health and social functioning (Libório & Ungar, 2013; Pessoa, Coimbra, Bottrell, & Noltemeyer, 2017; Raffaelli, Koller, & Cerqueira-Santos, 2012). Based on these considerations, we can state that resilience is the result of the interaction between the

risk factors and protective factors in someone's life.

Social structures may both constitute and exacerbate risk factors that operate contrary to the processes of resilience (Greene, 2014). Social forces, such as poverty, violence, gender discrimination, drug abuse and family breakdown, may serve to increase vulnerability and restrict young people's access to protective factors. On the other hand, protective social contexts have the potential to mitigate or even nullify the negative effects arising from the presence of risk factors. Thus, for example, in the midst of harsh social conditions, a warm relationship between a young person and an adult caregiver may serve to facilitate positive adjustment in the young person. Similarly, other forms of social intervention may serve to create a social environment that is facilitative of resilience, even in the midst of vulnerability (Van Breda, 2017).

It is, therefore, important to understand how institutions and social resources positively impact people and their communities, creating contexts of resilience that direct them onto stable life trajectories. This ethical commitment raises important implications for social policies directed to interventions that address the realities of young people who grow up in adverse conditions.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the processes of resilience in the lives of a group of young people living in the Brazilian context who were exposed to various indicators of psychosocial risk. In particular, young people in this study have faced a range of difficult social and economic conditions. The reflections presented are based on their experiences of a youth service that provides pedagogical art activities, which aim to produce civic engagement and social participation of adolescents, in order to facilitate

emancipatory dynamics and disrupt oppressive social structures.

### **Resilience, social change, and arts and youth services**

The medical and psychological sciences have contributed significantly to the theory and epistemological frameworks that underpin research on resilience. Early studies on resilience, particularly those related to psychological processes, adopted expressions such as ‘invincible’ or ‘invulnerable’ to refer to individuals who supposedly were not affected by stressful events in their lives. The result of this has been an overemphasis on the resilience of the individual in the face of apparently insurmountable odds in the social environment (Joseph, 2013). Resilience has come to be associated with a philosophy of ‘pulling yourself up by your bootstraps’ – a highly individualized construction of resilience that reinforces the status quo and fails to take into account structural inequality and the systemic exclusion, oppression and marginalization of particular groups in society (Bourbeau, 2013). Western ideologies, which privilege the middle class discourse and the interests of certain ethnic groups, are defining the concepts of risk and protection, thus labeling people and groups as either resilient or deviant (Kaplan, 1999; Pessoa, 2015; Ungar, 2004). Similarly, studies that have focused on individual characteristics as constituents of protective factors, while seemingly ‘strengths focused’, still reflect a scientific paradigm that has served to maintain individual accountability for success or failure (Joseph, 2013; Wright & Masten, 2006; Kelly, 2001). Accordingly, these conceptualizations have produced a bifurcated understanding of young people as either resilient or not, without exploring the contextual factors that contribute to or protect young people from extreme vulnerability.

A number of early theorists and researchers (e.g. Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten & Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1982) were critical of such understandings, contending that resilience should be understood not as a personality trait or an innate ability of some individuals, but rather as a process of interaction between people and their environments (Van Breda, 2018). More recently, however, scholars and practitioners in the fields of education and social work have started to build theoretical frameworks anchored in ecological understandings of resilience, exploring the potential of educational programs and psychosocial interventions as contexts that facilitate resilience (Bottrell, 2009; Van Breda, 2017). Recent studies suggest that risk and protective factors should be understood dynamically, as bidirectional processes between individuals and their contexts (Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013).

We argue that it is not enough to analyze characteristics of the individual that are framed in hegemonic notions of success and in ‘overcoming’ specific problems. Resilience, even in this sense, does not apply solely to overcoming trauma and the psychological stressors associated with it. In order to consider resilience socially, and as a construct that guides the implementation of public policies, it is necessary to ensure civic positioning and critical and political engagement.

Individualized approaches to risk and resilience rely exclusively on non-contextualized conditions and downplay the historically-produced means of exclusion (Mondini, 2011). The mere description of so-called ‘risk’ contexts does not bring to light the elements of exclusion, exploitation and maintenance of violence, which have within them a means of social organization that is nourished by ideologies of domination and the maintenance of inequality (Bourbeau, 2013).

Pessoa, A. S. G. Coimbra, R. M. Murgo, C. S. Breda, A. V. Baker, A. Resilience processes of Brazilian young people: overcoming adversity through an arts program

Identifying contexts of vulnerability for young people has guided the creation of governmental and non-governmental actions in the Brazilian context. These proposals aim to minimize social inequality and the conditions of disadvantage that may compromise the development of young people experiencing marginalization, through initiatives in education, mental health, and the correctional system, as well as by strengthening community and family ties and professional programs. Institutions devoted to the care of young people can promote trajectories of resilience, by structuring their practices in alignment with the needs of local young people (Ungar, Liebenberg, Armstrong, Dudding, & Van de Vijver, 2013).

However, the creation of rigid categories that define these spaces as 'protective factors' reduces the complexity and diversity of meanings that young people ascribe to such places. Studies conducted in different parts of the world (e.g. Bolzan & Gale, 2012; Bottrell, 2009; Pessoa, Coimbra, Bottrell, & Noltemeyer, 2017; Theron, Liebenberg, & Malinidi, 2014; Ungar, 2004) show that some institutions and settings that are recurrently mentioned in the literature as 'protective', can actually serve to intensify discriminatory and exclusionary practices. For example, institutions created solely for 'disadvantaged' young people can often further marginalize them, in that they do not enable young people to understand their social conditions, do not contribute to the disruption of exclusionary social mechanisms and do not situate the individuals critically in the social structures (Martineau, 1999).

We advocate that institutions can be set up as spaces to promote resilience in the lives of young people in situations of exclusion. However, it is essential to rethink the institutional philosophy of these social programs, clearly defining their ethical and political positioning. The intervening

actions, supported by the benchmarks of resilience, should focus on the processes of human emancipation, which include elements of personal positivity in a paradigm that seeks to overcome exclusionary practices and emphasizes the effectiveness of social participation. Otherwise, the services offered may contribute merely to the maintenance of a system of inequalities, keeping intact exclusionary mechanisms perpetuated across generations.

While the learning of skills, attitudes and behaviors associated with becoming active citizens is often the task of local schools through civic education curricula, other sites of civic engagement and development are gaining more attention (El-Haj & Renda, 2009). Community-based youth organizations and activities have been places in which young people have developed a collective voice and a sense of identity through group membership and the promotion of action for social justice (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Ginwright & James, 2002).

One of the sets of youth development activities and programs that have shown merit in challenging social exclusion and promoting resilience is creative arts education. These activities, in school settings and beyond, have shown to be beneficial for low income students, who were subsequently more likely than those who did not participate in the arts to attend college, obtain employment, volunteer in their communities and participate in voting (Catterall, 2012). In addition, arts practice in after-school programs has been linked to more complex language acquisition (Heath & Roach, 1999), identity exploration and increased levels of intrinsic motivation and engagement (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). Collaborative research projects using arts methodologies have also been useful in constructing citizenship and developing citizenship capacities, such as a sense of social justice and agency, and intercultural

dialogue (Bell & Desai, 2011; Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011; Sonn, 2011; Torre, 2005). While this research highlights the importance of community-based arts programs for young people, there have been very few studies exploring the use of arts in youth service programs in Brazil. The key aims for this study were to explore what resilience looks like in a youth service in Brazil, using a psychosocial and ecological understanding, and to identify elements of arts practice and education that serve as mediums for resilience building.

## Method

We chose a qualitative approach, given that the issues investigated require thoughtful reflection on the personal meanings attributed by the participants to the social project analyzed. Furthermore, in keeping with the literature, we sought to understand the intersection of life trajectories that could constitute explanatory categories centered on the objectives of the study.

## Youth Service Analyzed

The fieldwork was conducted in a youth service entitled Aquarela Project, located in a mid-sized city within São Paulo state, Brazil. The researchers and directors of the youth service chose to disclose the name of their institution, because they believe this can serve as an inspiration to other contexts marked by rates of exclusion and violence.

The program is coordinated by the Social Assistance Department of the municipal government. The Aquarela Project offers services to approximately 300 children and adolescents, aged 7-15 years old, both male and female, who live in areas of economic deprivation and extreme vulnerability. The risk factors that young people face in this area include involvement in child labor, experiences of neglect and

abandonment, involvement in drug trafficking and exposure to sexual, physical and psychological violence.

The youth service provides artistic and educational activities from Mondays to Thursdays in an after-school program. Activities offered include classes in music (guitar, violin, keyboard, ukulele, percussion, introduction to music theory and choir), street dance, capoeira, graffiti, theater and circus productions, tutoring, recreation, and introductory levels sports. Participants themselves decide what activities they would like to participate in during the semester, with the opportunity to enhance their knowledge in a particular area or be involved in a range of different activities throughout the semester.

The authors of this paper have a close relationship to the professionals and young people in the service. Several studies have been conducted at the institution, which has facilitated the collection of data and reinforced the importance of a bridge between university and community. Among the commitments made by researchers to the institution is feedback from the results of this study, aimed at improving the service. Another key point is the establishment of a less hierarchical relationship with the young people (Bolzan & Gale, 2012), who contributed voluntarily to the development of this research.

## Participants

The participants were six young people, four males and two females, aged 16-23 years, who had previously been participants in the Aquarela Project and who were thus alumni of the project. The adolescents were purposively recruited, using the following inclusion criteria: 1) young people exposed to risk indicators; 2) the judgment of the professionals who work with them, that, despite these risks, the young people have demonstrated positive adjustment (i.e. resilience), and 3) young

people who developed artistic skills through the youth service and who are currently

working as an intern or in the artistic field. Table 1 describes the study participants:

Table 1. Description of Participants

Name	Age	Time attended the program	Risk indicators present in their contexts	Art activity that they currently teach
Alexandre	23	4 years	Psychological and physical violence in childhood, poverty	Music (guitar)
Clarice	16	8 years	Child labor, poverty, psychoactive substance use	Music (violin)
David	19	10 years	Exposure to drug trafficking	Music (guitar)
Felipe	16	9 years	Alcoholic mother; urban violence	Music (percussion)
Fernanda	17	9 years	Poverty; parental neglect and abandonment	Painting
Ivo	17	10 years	Poverty	Graffiti and Drawing

Source: Created by the authors.

### Procedures and Analysis

The two resources used during the fieldwork were: individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group with the same participants. The construction of the interview schedule was based on specific topics of the literature that articulate resilience processes in institutional spaces (Bottrell, 2009; Ungar *et al.*, 2013). The

questions were centered on five topics: 1) the sense of belonging to the youth service; 2) experiences related to the processes of learning; 3) the meanings attributed to arts and presentations in public spaces in their communities; 4) positive interpersonal relationships; and 5) life projects that are related to experiences in this service. Table 2 presents the questions used in the individual interviews:

Table 2. Interview questions

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is the significance of the project in your life?</li> <li>2. What do you think is special about this service?</li> <li>3. What have you learned in the project that you consider useful for your life?</li> <li>4. Who are the people who work in this service that you consider a life example?</li> <li>5. How are your life projects related to this youth service?</li> <li>6. What does art mean in your life?</li> <li>7. How did this service help to make your dreams come true?</li> </ol>
--

Source: Created by the authors.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one and lasted about 40 minutes. The focus group was conducted after the interviews and lasted 70 minutes. Two researchers were present: one was responsible for conducting the activity and the other made notes and observations. The focus group utilized the same questions as

the individual interviews, but fostered dialogue between the participants on their experiences. The interviews and focus group were recorded and fully transcribed by the first author who is biliterate in Portuguese and English. Initial analysis was conducted by the first author in Portuguese and large selections of the text were

translated into English and discussed with the second and third authors.

In order to capture an understanding of resilience in this context both deductive and inductive approaches were used to analyze the excerpts that emerged from the interviews and also from the focus groups (Willig, 2013). That is, the researchers used an ecological understanding of resilience as described previously; however, the analysis was also focused on identifying important contextual elements specific to this geographical area and setting. After open coding, sub-categories were identified, and finally, new themes aligned with the objectives of study were identified.

### Ethical Considerations

This research is part of the doctoral research of the first author and was approved by the Ethics Committee of Universidade Estadual Paulista (Unesp)

Presidente Prudente campus (protocol number 26468714.0.0000.5402). The research took into account the Declaration of Helsinki regarding the principles for medical research involving human subjects. Participants gave informed consent to participate and selected pseudonyms for themselves to preserve their anonymity in this paper.

### Findings

The data analysis generated five themes, grouped into two categories. The themes are associated with resilience and the role of the arts and youth service in the participants' lives. Table 3 shows the categories and themes that support them. Within each subsection of the findings, selected verbatim quotations from the transcripts are presented to illustrate the themes and to give voice to the participants of this study.

Table 3. Categories that emerged from the fieldwork

Categories	Themes
Key elements of building contexts of resilience	The importance of flexibility
	Meaningful activities: the significance of the arts in the participants' lives
	Positive relationships
Imagining new trajectories: Contexts of resilience and social change	Engagement and social transformation
	Life projects and professionalization

Source: Created by the authors.

### Key elements of building contexts of resilience

The first category refers to themes identified as central within the discourses of the young people to explain the resilience processes in their lives. Participants mentioned how the institution organizes its practices in a flexible way, as well as the

meaning that their involvement in artistic activities acquires in their lives (either as a therapeutic resource or because of the pride they feel when they make an exhibition in their own communities). Interpersonal relationships were highlighted intensively by participants. Some educators and the coordinator have been cited as powerful influences in their lives, because they care



about issues that go beyond the institutional context and helped them in a range of situations. These topics exemplify how the institution was relevant in fostering resilience for participants, whose development contexts were challenging and harmful.

### **The Importance of Flexibility**

In discussing what they believed worked well for them at Aquarela Project, participants used school, another context, as their reference point. All participants stated that there were major differences between the education offered in schools and the youth service. They suggested that regular schools have curricula with rigid structures and mandatory content, which prevents them from choosing topics that are of interest to them (Clarice: “The school acts as if it were a dictatorship. One must obey and that’s it”). By contrast, participants felt positive that the youth service allowed them to choose which workshops will be held throughout the year (Ivo: “The workshops are really cool and you choose what you want to do. Nothing is mandatory. At school you have so many restrictions” / Philip: “The school must be like it is here... people could choose their own classes”).

### **Meaningful Activities: The Significance of the Arts in the Participants’ Lives**

In addition to establishing a context that reduces hierarchical structures and rigid understandings of curriculum, it is clear that the activities in this setting are central to the young people participating in the research. All participants expressed the view that *‘art is everything to me’*, highlighting the importance of the opportunities available and the creative modalities as central to their wellbeing. When questioned further about the positive personal meanings attributed to artistic processes, responses included justifications

about the personal benefits, such as expression of identity, recognition and a way to reconcile their experiences of vulnerability. These personal benefits also led to new imaginings and aspirations in the future, that is, opportunities for professionalization and new ways of understanding the world. Two participants even reported the therapeutic effects that arts have had on their lives.

Fernanda: Painting for me is peace. I even forget my problems. When I am with my paintings I forget everything. It’s like a therapy. I am doing what I like. And when you finish, everyone praises it. I always give it my best.

David: Once I was beginning to get depressed. I lost a very dear person in my family who was my foster mother, but she was more important to me than my real mother. Nothing went right for me. It seems that everything was over. But the music kept widening my horizons... I learned new songs. So much so that I did not need to go to the psychologist with whom I had an appointment.

The presentations of their artistic work, held periodically in the communities, were cited as an important aspect (Ivo: “It’s pretty cool to show other people what you can do. You feel admired”). Participants claim to like being able to show their artistic skills to an audience, because they are evaluated after a fashion and can improve their performance. They point out that the applause of the audience is motivating and a means of recognition of the work and effort expended during the year (Alexandre: “I loved to present. I liked to show to the audience that I knew how to play guitar”). Therefore, the artistic presentations in the community affirm the youth people’s skills and promote a sense of pride for something that was learned during the classes in the youth service.

## Positive Relationships

Another theme identified was the importance of different types of relationships developed through their time at Aquarela Project. For example, participants highlighted the differences between interpersonal relationships and bonds established between students and teachers of the school and in the youth service. They considered that the school teachers establish hierarchical relations of power, seem unmotivated, were only concerned with educational content and undervalued matters of affectivity (Fernanda: “It seems that teachers don’t care. They don’t give advice and it seems that they merely want to fulfill their obligation. In the Aquarela Project they teach, give advice and fill in for the role of parents sometimes, because they really like you”). In another situation, a participant contrasted the level of trust in professionals who work in schools and in the youth service (David: “Sometimes I was sad when I arrived at Aquarela Project, but I left with a clearer perspective. I went to talk to F [coordinator of the service] and it was a relief...At school, who can I talk to? It’s very different”).

The quality of relationships with educators from the youth service was also discussed by the participants. They pointed out that those professionals cared about their lives, helped with whatever they needed and gave useful advice when necessary. Some reported that they rely more on these professionals than on members of their families (Alexandre: “They [the educators] are more important than my parents. Because at home I never experienced affection, discipline, get it?” / David: “F [coordinator] is like a father. The affection I have for him is the affection you have for a father. He’s got fatherly affection for me. For everything in my life I turn to him”). In addition, all participants

acknowledge that the coordinator is the main person responsible for the quality of the service and attribute trust and affection to him. The value of the Aquarela Project is not only about the range of project activities offered, but also about the ways in which program activities, which serve to connect people, facilitate the development of key social relationships.

Together these three elements of the context (flexibility, meaningful activities and relationships) suggest that the development of resilience requires both the structures (i.e., flexibility, choice) and engaging activities to establish strong social bonds.

## Imagining new trajectories: contexts of resilience and social change

The second category showed how the arts program helped the participants to commit themselves to their communities, establishing life projects that suggest a social engagement and transformation of oppressive realities. In this sense, engagement in artistic activities seems to mobilize the young people’s desire for social change and strengthening of educational actions in contexts of vulnerability, which may be related to processes of community resilience. One strategy pointed out by them would be to act as social educators and use the arts as an educational tool to promote social inclusion. But the most important aspect found in this category is that arts enable adolescents to aspire to better futures for themselves and their communities.

## Engagement and Social Transformation

Some participants declared that they intended, in the future, to work in activities and spaces where they can help other young people who have had similar life experiences. For example, one participant noted that her time in the youth service

inspired her to pursue a path that allowed her to work for social change (Fernanda: “I want to make a difference in someone’s life. I want to work in places like Aquarela Project in the future and be able to help”). Several of the young people emphasized seeking careers as educators, once they recognized the transformation potential of programs committed to the reality of young people exposed to exclusion, and of the use of artistic resources in places marked by violence and poverty. They clearly showed a desire to work for their communities to improve difficult conditions. Alexandre: “Nowadays my dream is to help society. I want to do a project where children can learn art and culture for free. It changed my life and I’m sure it could change the lives of other children too”.

They also mentioned the difficulties that young people have to deal with in their communities – exposure to drug trafficking, rates of urban violence, poverty issues that limit access to cultural benefits, and complex family dynamics –demonstrating awareness not only of their own personal situations, but also of the social contexts of other young people. They indicated that the project collaborates in addressing social issues through awareness of situations that can be identified as inappropriate or even dangerous to youth. David told us one of his stories and recognized the importance of the project in terms of relevant changes that have occurred in his life:

David: When I was 12, my neighbor was a drug dealer. I was there with him. I learned to take apart and put together a gun. I packaged the drugs for him. I learned to shoot, I learned their language, the things of the crime. Once I told F [coordinator] that I had learned to shoot. I do not like lying to him and then I said everything. He got angry and talked to me a lot. I thought I did not want to be away from my family and from Aquarela Project. I slowly distanced myself from this. The guy [the drug dealer] died, the police killed him. If not for F, I would not have left. After his death, I kept

thinking about it for two years. As it was next door, I remember the police coming and shooting at everybody. So for me it was obvious. If not for F [coordinator], I would not be alive.

## Life Projects and Professionalization

The data showed that the plans that participants had for their lives are, to at least some extent, related to the skills they acquired in the youth service. Four participants reported the desire to become teachers of the arts and to work in social programs and community contexts. Even the participants who were not interested in working with arts and education reported that the skills they acquired at the youth service will be useful in their careers, given that their intended careers are related to creative processes (Felipe: “I want to be an architect because I like to draw. I had drawing lessons in Aquarela Project. Since childhood I like to draw, but I could not do that at home. I took my classes here”). All participants stated that they intend to undertake a course of higher education, enroll in courses for improving their skills, and, in some cases, conduct training activities overseas.

All participants were acting as teachers or teaching assistants in the artistic modality in which they excelled while they were attending the youth service. They appreciated that the project allowed them to learn a profession and demonstrate pride in the activities they perform (Ivo: “I learned here in the project that I can show people that I’m able to do things for myself”). They also described the positive feelings they had when they were invited to return to the service as assistants and how excited they were the first time they taught art classes.

## Discussion

All of the participants in this study had been exposed to multiple adversities, qualifying them as ‘vulnerable’ within their

social environment and within the Brazilian context. However, all six demonstrated trajectories of resilience, which were fostered through important elements of resilience developed in the youth service context. Their narratives illustrate the various ways in which their participation in the arts programs of the youth service contributed to these trajectories, highlighting in particular the person-environment interactions that were essential to their development of resilience. While the young people did identify elements of the context that were especially important, including the structure of the service, the activities (arts modalities) and the relationships they established, they also highlighted the importance of giving back and making a difference to other young people and the broader community.

However, their aspirations were not just a result of attending the youth service and developing individual skills; it is clear that prolonged engagement at Aquarela Project facilitated processes of reflexivity for the young people. For example, with the presence of widespread vulnerabilities in the social environment around them, young people gained a critical awareness of the ways in which the broader social and economic structures influence their lives and their communities. By having a safe space and opportunities to pursue their passions, many young people, through their participation in this program, had developed a desire to engage more proactively in changing their social environments through their roles as youth mentors.

The themes that emerged from the data collected reiterate the concept of resilience as a dynamic and relational process, as pointed out by Pessoa, Liebenberg, Fonseca and Medeiros (2018), Rutter (1987), Sanders, Munford and Liebenberg (2012) and Van Breda (2018). Furthermore, in accordance with Ungar *et al.* (2007), the results of this investigation

highlight that institutions can enable subjective strengthening and promote favorable elements for personal positivity, self-esteem and a sense of belonging. The findings demystify the theoretical propositions of resilience grounded in naturalized biases associated with deterministic conceptions of human development, such as those found in biological approaches.

The research also highlights the potential of institutions as spaces to promote resilience (Coholic, 2011; Fraser, Robinson, & Loughheed, 2012; Gilligan, 2006; Pessoa, Coimbra, Bottrell, & Noltemeyer, 2017). However, the participants' contrast between school and the youth service reinforces the importance of considering how intervention programs structure activities in keeping with youth cultures and the specific needs of the targeted youth. We believe that art and technology resources stand as privileged strategies in this endeavor, since they are associated with the interests of most young people today and thus become valuable media for engaging youth in resilience building.

The young people's relationships with educators in the youth service (in contrast to educators at school) represent empowerment for the participants of this study. The literature on resilience has shown the importance of family members (Yunes, Garcia, & Albuquerque, 2007; Walsh, 2005), community (McKim, 2005; Ojeda, 2005; Clauss-Ehlers & Levi, 2002) and institutions (Theron, Liebenberg & Malinidi, 2014; Ungar *et al.*, 2013; Mitchell, 2011) in the lives of young people facing social exclusion. These people are commonly cited as examples of life and inspiration for overcoming adversity. Educators, who are experienced as role models and care-givers in this study, can play a central role in promoting the resilience of vulnerable young people (Ungar, 2013). This aligns with almost all

resilience research – meaningful relationships are central (Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013).

Artistic modalities allow young people to critically position themselves in relation to oppressive social structures. Such conditions are possible once young people perform deep analyses of their life contexts, establishing complex relationships with reality and overcoming simplified conceptualizations of everyday life (Heller, 1991). The leap of the psyche fostered by art collaborates in a critical social positioning process (Leontiev, 1978). In this way, it is likely that the youth service's focus on the arts enabled a deeper understanding of oppressive realities and a wider challenging of social forces that exclude and marginalize them (Thornton, 2015) than another youth service focused on, for example, computer gaming.

The participants showed willingness to engage in activities in their own communities, demonstrating a sense of belonging and proposals for changes of oppressive structures through increasing opportunities by which other people might access artistic resources (Chen, Lau, Tapanya & Cameron, 2012). They understand that artistic activities allow young people to have perspectives of their lives beyond those found in contexts of limited resources and opportunities.

Finally, this study shows that the skills participants gained through the youth service helped them to engage in professional activities in the future. They also mentioned positive memories about the service and their first experiences as art teachers. These aspects relate to the conclusions of other studies on resilience, since they are connected to the construction of life projects and the positive experiences that help them to face the adversities present in their contexts.

### **Limitations**

Because this study focused on resilience processes, all the participants emphasized only their positive experiences of the project and its contribution to their lives. Furthermore, only young people who had had a positive experience of the program were recruited – voices of a difference were not heard. Therefore, an important aspect to consider in future is the trajectories of young people who do not respond favorably to interventions of this service, whether through critical discourses or by abandonment of the institution. We also stress the need to conduct longitudinal research, to follow up the impact of the youth service on the young people's lives, as well as the inclusion of diverse research methodologies and techniques.

### **Final considerations**

The study has presented implications for building social policies that consider the perspectives of young people facing social exclusion. The findings reveal the transformative potential of artistic resources and activities. These findings suggest a modification to the curriculum of formal and non-formal education that are based on rigid structures and that do not engage and dialogue with youth and youth culture. We recommend that further studies be conducted on the process of the professional training of those who have been working with young people in youth services.

The perspective of the participants provides a better understanding of the trajectories of resilience and their connection to participation in a youth service that provides art activities for young people exposed to contexts of vulnerability. The strategies used by this youth service may contribute to the development of more consistent intervention programs and positive outcomes for similar groups. We have learned that the arts constitute a resource that can help young people walk

Pessoa, A. S. G. Coimbra, R. M. Murgo, C. S. Breda, A. V. Baker, A. Resilience processes of Brazilian young people: overcoming adversity through an arts program

away from the models of inequality that operate systematically in their lives.

## References

- Bell, L. A., & Desai, D. (2011). Imagining Otherwise: Connecting the Arts and Social Justice to Envision and Act for Change: Special Issue Introduction. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 44(3), 287-295.
- Bolzan, N., & Gale, F. (2012). Using an Interrupted Space to Explore Social Resilience with Marginalized Young People. *Qualitative Social Work*, 11(5), 502-516.
- Bottrell, D. (2009). Understanding 'Marginal' Perspectives towards a Social Theory of Resilience. *Qualitative Social Work*, 8(3), 321-339.
- Bourbeau, P. (2013). Resiliencism: Premises and Promises in Securitisation Research. *Resilience*, 1(1), 3-17.
- Catterall, J. S. (2012). *The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies (Research report #55)*. Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts.
- Chen, J., Lau, C., Tapanya, S., & Cameron, C. A. (2012). Identities as Protective Processes: Socio-Ecological Perspectives on Youth Resilience. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 15(6), 761-779.
- Clauss-Ehlers, C. S., & Levi, L. L. (2002). Violence and Community, Terms in Conflict: An Ecological Approach to Resilience. *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless*, 11(4), 265-278.
- Coholic, D. (2011). Exploring the Feasibility and Benefits of Arts-Based Mindfulness-Based Practices with Young People in Need: Aiming to Improve Aspects of Resilience. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 44(4), 303-317.
- Dell'Aglio, D. D., & Koller, S. H. (2011). *Adolescência e juventude: vulnerabilidade e contextos de proteção*. São Paulo: Casa do Psicólogo.
- Edinburgh, L. D., Garcia, C., Harpin, S., & Saewyc, E. M. (2013). Differences in Abuse and Related Risk and Protective Factors by Runaway Status for Adolescents Seen at a Child Advocacy Center. *International Journal of Child and Adolescent Resilience*, 1(1), 4-16.
- El-Haj, A., & Renda, T. (2009). Imagining Post Nationalism: Arts, Citizenship Education, and Arab American Youth. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 40(1), 1-19.
- Fraser, M., Robinson, B., & Lougheed, S. (2012). Promoting Resilience within Child Protection: The Suitability of Arts-Based and Experiential Group Programs for Children in Care. *Social Work with Groups*, 35(4), 345-361.
- Gilligan, R. (2006). Creating a Warm Place Where Children can Blossom. *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, 28, 36-45.
- Ginwright, S., & James, T. (2002). From Assets to Agents of Change: Social Justice, Organizing, and Youth Development. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 96, 27-46.
- Greene, R. R. (2014). Resilience as Effective Functional Capacity: An Ecological-Stress Model. *Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment*, 24(8), 937-950.
- Heath, S., & Roach, A. (1999). Imaginative Actuality: Learning in the Arts During non School Hours. In E. Fiske (Ed.). *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning* (pp. 19-34). Washington DC: Arts Education Partnership and

Pessoa, A. S. G. Coimbra, R. M. Murgo, C. S. Breda, A. V. Baker, A. Resilience processes of Brazilian young people: overcoming adversity through an arts program

- President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities.
- Heller, A. (1991). *Sociología de la Vida Cotidiana*. Barcelona: Ediciones Península.
- Joseph, J. (2013). Resilience as Embedded Neoliberalism: A Governmentality Approach. *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses*, 1(1), 38-52.
- Kaplan, H. (1999). Toward an Understanding of Resilience: A Critical Review of Definitions and Models. In M. Glantz & J. Johnson (Eds.). *Resilience and Development: Positive life Adaptations* (pp.17-83). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Kelly, P. (2001). Youth at Risk: Processes of Individualization and Responsibilisation in the Risk Society. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 22(1), 23-33.
- Leontiev, A. N. (1978). *O desenvolvimento do psiquismo*. Lisboa: Livros Horizonte.
- Libório, R. M. C., & Ungar, M. (2013). Resilience as Protagonism: Interpersonal Relationships, Cultural Practices, and Personal Agency among Working Adolescents in Brazil. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(5), 682-696.
- Luthar, S. S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). The Construct of Resilience: A Critical Evaluation and Guidelines for Future Work. *Child Development*, 71, 543-562.
- Madyaningrum, M. E., & Sonn, C. C. (2011). Exploring the Meaning of Participation in a Community Art Project: A Case Study on the Seeming Project. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 21(4), 358-370.
- Masten, A. S., & Garmezy, N. (1985). Risk, Vulnerability, and Protective Factors in Developmental Psychopathology. In B. Lahey, & A. Kazdin (Eds.). *Advances in Clinical Child Psychology* (pp. 12-52). New York: Plenum Press.
- Martineau, S. (1999). *Rewriting Resilience: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Childhood Resilience and the Politics of Teaching Resilience to 'Kids at Risk'*. Doctoral dissertation, British Columbia University, Vancouver, Canada.
- McKim, M. K. (2005). Resilience in Children, Families and Communities: Linking Context to Practice and Policy. *Canadian Psychology*, 46(4), 260-261.
- Mitchell, P. F. (2011). Evidence-Based Practice in Real-World Services for Young People with Complex Needs: New Opportunities Suggested by Recent Implementation Science. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(2), 207-216.
- Mondini, C. L. C. M. (2011). *Resiliência e Medidas Socioeducativas: Síntese Dialética de Múltiplas Determinações*. Masters Thesis, Universidade Federal do Mato Grosso do Sul, Corumbá, Brazil.
- Ojeda, E. N. S. (2005). Uma concepção latino-americana: A resiliência comunitária. In A. Melillo & E. N. S. Ojeda (Eds.). *Resiliência: descobrindo as próprias fortalezas* (pp. 45-57). Porto Alegre: Artmed.
- Pessoa, A. S. G. (2015). *Trajetórias negligenciadas: processos de resiliência em adolescentes com histórico de envolvimento no tráfico de drogas*. Doctoral dissertation, Universidade Estadual Paulista, Presidente Prudente, São Paulo, Brasil.
- Pessoa, A. S. G., Coimbra, R. M., Bottrell, D., & Noltemeyer, A. L. (2017).

Pessoa, A. S. G. Coimbra, R. M. Murgu, C. S. Breda, A. V. Baker, A. Resilience processes of Brazilian young people: overcoming adversity through an arts program

- Resilience Processes within the School Context of Adolescents with Sexual Violence History. *Educação em Revista*, 33, 1-25.
- Pessoa, A. S. G., Liebenberg, L., Fonseca, D. B., & Medeiros, J. K. (2018). Resilience and Vulnerability for Children Residing in Foster Care: A Qualitative Study Conducted in Brazil. *Early Child Development and Care*, 188, 1-14.
- Raffaelli, M., Koller, S. H., & Cerqueira-Santos, E. (2012). Protective Factors Moderate between Risk Exposure and Behavioral Adjustment among Low Income Brazilian Adolescents and Young Adult. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 9, 74-92.
- Rutter, M. (1987). Psychosocial Resilience and Protective Mechanisms. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57, 316-331.
- Sanders, J., Munford, R., & Liebenberg, L. (2012). Young People, Their Families and Social Supports: Understanding Resilience with Complexity Theory. In M. Ungar (Ed.). *The Social Ecology of Resilience: A Handbook of Theory and Practice* (pp. 233-243). New York, NY: Springer.
- Shernoff, D. J., & Vandell, D. L. (2007). Engagement in After-School Program Activities: Quality of Experience from the Perspective of Participants. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 36(7), 891-903.
- Sonn, C. C. (2011). Research and Practice in the Contact Zone: Crafting Resources for Challenging Racialised Exclusion. *International Community Psychology*, 53, 272-292.
- Southwick, S. M., Bonanno, G. A., Masten, A. S., Panter-Brick, C., & Yehuda, R. (2014). Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 5, 1-14.
- Theron, L. C., Liebenberg, L., & Malinidi, M. J. (2014). When Schooling Experiences are Respectful of Children's Rights: A Pathway to Resilience. *School Psychology International*, 35(3), 253-265.
- Thornton, S. (2015). Theatre for Social Change: Collective Encounters on Rediscovering the Radical. *Journal of Arts & Communities*, 7(1), 33-43.
- Torre, M. E. (2005). The Alchemy of Integrated Spaces: Youth Participation in Research Collectives of Difference. In L. Weis & M. Fine (Eds.). *Beyond Silenced Voices* (pp. 251-266). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Ungar, M. (2004). *Nurturing Hidden Resilience in Troubled Youth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Ungar, M. (2013). The Impact of Youth-Adult Relationships on Resilience. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 4(3), 328-336.
- Ungar, M., Brown, M., Liebenberg, L., Othman, R., Kwong, W. M., Armstrong, M., & Gilgun, J. (2007). Unique Pathways to Resilience across Cultures. *Adolescence*, 42(166), 287-310.
- Ungar, M., Ghazinour, M., & Richter, J. (2013). What is Resilience within the Ecology of Human Development? *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 54(4), 348-366.
- Ungar, M., Liebenberg, L., Armstrong, M., Dudding, P., & Van de Vijver, F. J. R. (2013). Patterns of Service Use, Individual and Contextual Risk Factors, and Resilience among Adolescents Using Multiple



Pessoa, A. S. G. Coimbra, R. M. Murgo, C. S. Breda, A. V. Baker, A. Resilience processes of Brazilian young people: overcoming adversity through an arts program

- Psychosocial Services. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 37(2), 150-159.
- Van Breda, A. D. (2017). A Comparison of Youth Resilience across Seven South African Sites. *Child & Family Social Work*, 22(1), 226-235.
- Van Breda, A. D. (2018). A Critical Review of Resilience Theory and its Relevance for Social Work. *Social Work / Maatskaplikewerk*, 54(1), 1-18.
- Walsh, F. (2005). *Fortalecendo a resiliência familiar*. São Paulo: Roca.
- Watts, R. J., & Flanagan, C. (2007). Pushing the Envelope on Youth Civic Engagement: A Developmental and Liberation Psychology Perspective. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 35(6), 779-792.
- Werner, E., & Smith, R. (1982). *Vulnerable but Invincible: A Study of Resilient Children*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Willig, C. (2013). *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Maidenhead, UK: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Wright, M. O., & Masten, A. (2006). Resilience Processes in Development: Fostering Positive Adaptation in the Context of Adversity. In S. Goldstein, S. & R. Brooks (Eds.). *Handbook of Resilience in Children* (pp. 17-37). New York: Springer.
- Yunes, M. A. M., Garcia, N. M., & Albuquerque, B. M. (2007). Monoparentalidade, pobreza e resiliência: Entre as crenças dos profissionais e as possibilidades da convivência familiar. *Psicologia: Reflexão e Crítica*, 20(3), 444-453.
- Yunes, M. A. M. (2013). Strategies to Promote Resilience in Families of Low Income Exposed to Social and Environmental Risks. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 3, 705-719.

Recebido em: 16/10/2017

Aprovado em: 14/08/2018