

The relationship between music and street children and adolescents.

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Abstract

This communication approaches the ways through which a group of children and adolescents who live on the streets are related to music, and the meanings that they attribute to it. The research has been done in a Porto Alegre city school (EPA), in Brazil, destined to street children and adolescents.

Defined as an “open school”, EPA has distinguished characteristics, compared to other educational institutions, because of its flexible organization and its non-hierarchized relationship with the knowledge domains. This school receives in each of its classes students from various ages, read and write levels and cognitive development. The class attendance is free of control: no matter how long the student has been absent, his return is guaranteed and it's always viable. The school curriculum is developed based on the reality of its students, after an investigation conducted with them in order to find out their problems and their most urgent needs.

Through a socioeducational approach and as proposed by Christopher Small's conceptions, the Case Study Methodology has allowed us to make an interpretation of how music was inserted in social relationships that were established in this school community. Small (1989) reflects on how music educators have to recognize the origins of the practices and conceptions about music today, about Music Education and about how we are connected to music, arguing that society, music and education are strictly related to each other. The author suggests that music has been considered as one more knowledge object to be dominated by mankind, withdrawing itself from its “experiential” nature as well as losing its “community character”.

The “experiential” and “community” aspects of music that had been observed emphasize the mediation of the EPA political-pedagogic project in the musical activities of its students. Music has been integrated in a context of valorization of knowledge diversity as one more language that has allowed the self-knowledge, the development and the expressivity of the students as well as becoming one of the reasons of a bond between students and school.

The relationship between music and street children and adolescents

This communication approaches the ways through which a group of children and adolescents who live on the streets are related to music, and the meanings that they attribute to it, starting from data obtained through a research that had as scenery a Porto Alegre Municipal School – EPA, in Brazil. The project was developed with the Post-Graduation Programme in Music – Masters and Doctorate, at Rio Grande do Sul Federal University, Brazil, during 1999 and 2000, involving 20 children and adolescents.

1. About the EPA school

The Porto Alegre Municipal School – EPA is a public school that belongs to a Municipal Chain of Schools, in the city of Porto Alegre, state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, destined to street children and adolescents between 10 and 18 years old.

Throughout a flexible organization, EPA admits in each classroom students at different ages, read and write levels and cognitive development. The class attendance is free of control: no matter how long the student has been absent, his return is guaranteed. However, the characteristic that

probably makes this school different from most other teaching institutions, is non-hierarchized and non-formal relationship with knowledge domains.

EPA's socioeducational approach searches for alternative possibilities of relationship with knowledge – including the musical – where experienced knowledge is estimated and is the starting point for eventual – and if appropriate – appraisals; aims to develop the agency (acting) of the individual through a dialogic relationship with knowledge, dissipating formality; and, yet, updates the curriculum by inserting the students' collected speaking themes, their silence and their quotidian and concret requires. Therefore, the curriculum appraised topics such as sexuality, ethnic subjects, work, drugs, violence, AIDS, power, citizenship which crossed the different fields of knowledge.

Besides the traditional contents, subjects as Computer classes, Environmental Education, Poetry reading circle, Capoeira, Physical Education, Pottery classes, and Recycled Paper workshops were included in the curriculum. The educators worked hard to translate and interpret their pupils' speeches, so that time and space shared at school could be occupied by a common subtext.

The quality of the social relationships in the school community was produced by the proximity among students and teachers, since these paid close attention to subjective questions as well as to matters to which children and adolescents occupied themselves with in their daily lives: teachers accompanied students who were HIV positive, talked about sexual life, situations involving robbery and exploitation, knew the students' family relationships; knew who used drugs and what kind of drugs was being used, which the influence in certain kinds of friendship was, knew who was involved with prostitution, and who were the students' best friends. Teachers knew who was going to the students' homes, they shared students' affectionate lives; talked about students' identification and fulfillment with certain fields and about their projects for life, starting from a spontaneous contact which was not only limited to the classroom. That is, there were bonds among children as well as teenagers and various adults of the school, which transcended the speech collection for the construction of the curriculum.

Although music did not belong to the school curriculum, the students who were observed showed great interest in music and participated of an almost daily activity at school: either listening to music on a stereo system, in the playground or in the classroom; or playing percussion instruments in samba circles, what could happen spontaneously at any moment or due to a scheduled presentation; or at a rehearsal at Sabedoria de Rua (Street Wisdom), a rap group formed by 6 boys and 3 girls, that prepared collective and individual choreographies for presentations inside and outside school; or in capoeira circles; or singing in line in front of the refectory, while waiting for the time to enter and eat; or singing and drumming at the school's walls, doors and pillars; or singing and dancing in the hallway going to the classroom.

Having EPA as an investigation setting, the main aspect of this project was established to reveal the meanings attributed from EPA's students to music, and develop the forms they dealt with it. The specific questions were: How is music inserted in this school's life? How do its students relate to music? In which level does the school socioeducational project, reflected in its time-space, determine the relationship of the students with music?

2. Methodology

Through a socioeducational approach, the Case Study Methodology has allowed us to make an interpretation of how music was inserted in social relationships that were established in this school community. The collected data were interpreted according to two analytical obliquities: the "community" and the "experiential" aspects of music, pointed by SMALL (1989).

The "community" aspect that music has acquired in this setting is developed starting from the street children and adolescents' bonds with school, the bonds between their mates and friends, and yet, between the social relationships that were established in the school community. Besides this, music is seen as a possibility of being included and how it participates of formation of identity.

The meanings which EPA's students attributed to music, and the forms how they related to it are also developed from the "experiential" aspect of music, which was observed between street children and adolescents that attended school. The "experiential" aspect is approached under the perspective of their interest in songs they listened to, played, sang and danced, as well as the way music was inserted in students' relationships with other knowledge they experienced at school.

3. The "Community" Aspect of Music at EPA

Almost every observed student lived under bridges near each other, of the same streamlet, in the urban area of Porto Alegre. Because of this, everybody knew who was spending some days at home, who was sick or injured, who was dating who, who was in the hospital. They knew who had gone to school, and who was "working", who was watching the cars in parking lots near the bridges. This activity was performed by most of the observed children and adolescents, and there was music while they watched the cars, as Rogério reported:

R- There are buckets, the tins we wash the cars with, and we are there, playing. There are some who make sounds with their mouths, then when we see, there's some sounds, then we....are there. We get some entertainment, right? Do you want to be there, upset, waiting for the money to come, the money is short, then we...nonsense, isn't it, to be there, upset, waiting for a little money to come, and to be sad? Singing, then, we laugh, singing, we talk there, then I think that... we get free from that suffering, that, you know, every worker (or) innocent feels. I think that then we get a little bit free. We have a little bit consciousness. (Interview, 9.30.1999)

Music seemed to give them the meaning of group, when everybody gathered at the same bridge to sing, play and dance the songs they knew from the radio. There were also moments of creation of their own music that could be collective and, according to Rogério, it happened through improvised rap, as he reported in the interview:

R- (...) then, like this, look, if someone... like this, by phrases, sometimes I do this, a phrase, then if I don't know how to sing the other phrase he has it in his mind and insert it, his phrase along with mine; then he stops in another part and I invent, others invent, and then the thing goes... then we have a bigger song. Because if I sing, I sing just a little, right? If he sings, he sings just a little, if another person sings, he sings a bit, then we put the whole thing together, sing a little, and then the whole song. (Interview, 9.30.1999)

It was also in the center of the group that creation was becoming more consistent, while they experimented and "rehearsed" songs of kids who composed rap, as Rogério told about a rap he composed along with Josué:

R- Because (rap) has its parts, right? He (Josué) determines the parts I have to sing and the parts he has to sing. Sometimes we get the girls, Cristina, who plays lady, they call lady the girls who sing (he smiles), then we give them a chorus they have to sing. Then it gets cool, you know, as we were really singing! We say we're practicing for when we get older, have a chance, or even now, while we're young, have a chance...we're good at singing! And everyone likes it. (Interview, 9.30.1999)

At EPA, music also had a community aspect, when the students listened to something interesting in the classroom, or in the VCR of the library and immediately called the "others"- security guards, classmates, the school principal, cleaners, teachers - to listen to it as well. They saw each other as a social group in which hierarchical roles do not emerge to the detriment of what people are. Besides that, their musical activities justified themselves much more as social ones.

Identity

In different moments it has been observed music participation in three relevant aspects which street children and adolescents' identity is built: in frustration of deprivation of their childhood (CRAIDY, 1998), in the necessity of the group and its stigma, which was daily reinforced by the contact with assistencial institutions and on the streets, while they were among the population in general. Therefore, they are seen as "a mass with no form, subhuman, born from the sidewalks, (...) show up to services to which their help as users is destined, as students (in Portuguese: a-luno=without light), as cases to be resolved" (LEMOS, 2002, p.114).

According to LEMOS (2002),

"the street children or the excluded categories accompany the role of such individual as a person with one possibility only: be misplaced. The way they are seen by 'others' prepares to the street child a construction of him/herself. (...) When a boy says: 'there is almost nothing about me', this nothing suggests an absence of himself that is given as much by the negative aspect of his identity, as by the social invisibility aspect he lives daily" (ibid, p.114).

While performing musical activities, the children and adolescents could minimize the effects of such identity aspects. According to SMALL (1995), when we are somehow involved with music, we connect to what we think to be ideal for us, to our image of ourselves and to the image of what we judge to be the best as a relationship with the world and others. For SMALL (1998), the performance is not formed in a moment of fun, but teaches us about our place in the world, in relation with people and nature.

For EPA's children and adolescents, the musical performance was important because it was a moment when they could connect to their best and what their imagination could proportionate, in spite of deprivation of childhood and of stigma; and they also had the possibility of connecting with a "high quality" of relationship which subverted the order of relationships established by necessity and submissiveness to the group.

4. The "experiential" aspect of music at EPA

Improvisation

The conception of time that street children and adolescents build is the present moment, the "here and now" and the improvisation. The feeling of taking the known risk, of "figuring out" certain situations in the shortest possible time, of improvisation was also among their pleasures in their musical practices.

This feeling was reported to us by one of the students, during an interview after a performance of Sabedoria de Rua (Street Wisdom) which had not been planned. Lucas, thrilled, told us how he had been awoken at 9 in the morning; he did not believe his friend who went to wake him up to start a performance. According to him, the best of everything was to have been caught by surprise:

Oh, I liked it because of this, I liked it because we were caught by surprise! You see, we hadn't practiced anything. Oh, I liked it this way, we were called this way, we had to go and could not make mistakes! We had to remember everything we had done at our last rehearsal!(...) It is the same as if the world finishes and you don't know at what time! As the world finished now, and we were caught by surprise!!

(Interview, 9.8.1999)

In the daily lives of street children and adolescents, the situations involving commitment, responsibilities or appointments are rare, since they live with a lack of bonds, apart from dominant institutions and live their lives on streets with principles (CRAIDY, 1998). The musical improvisation became, then, a unique activity at the developing and deepening of the students' individual and musical bonds, because it started to create commitment and a wish of continuity.

The music they heard almost daily at the school playground, was always lived as new opportunities for taking risks, for trying combination of new dance steps with the ones that already existed, for trying to adapt them to different time, the same way as when they played percussion instruments:

they seemed like they were checking if their mates were daring in the same measurement, reinforcing the already existent bonds among them.

As the students did not attend rap classes or take any guidance for their choreographies at EPA, the dance practice was always under an improvisation condition, however much there was a constructed choreography of body movements. They were always innovating, always risking to include new skills, which could come from the street, other rap groups or from the media.

The musical improvisation had a relevant meaning for the observed students: it meant to risk without taking the real risk of violence to which they were exposed to daily. When they improvised, the students had the opportunity to face something unknown - the not planned musical and body contents - without the familiar feeling of fear. According to SMALL, it is normal to expect that the musical improvisation come from "community groups where the musicians are people who listeners know, and these feel like accompanying them in their adventures, however much insignificant or risky they are" (SMALL, 1989, p 179).

For the observed children and adolescents, whose life stories were constituted in a state of risk and the present quotidian is of complete uncertainty the action of creating and improvising with music meant, even before the possibilities of expression, an opportunity of living these moments, the cheerfulness of the new, of the unforeseen - proper of childhood and stimulator of curiosity - exempt of risk, and because of this, of fear.

Formality

At Sabedoria de Rua (Street Wisdom) case, as much as at percussion practice, the students' involvement at the moment of the performance did not differ if they were playing or dancing at EPA's playground, or performing at public place. The musical development, the power of the body and the skill with percussion instruments were a consequence of the students' pleasant and spontaneous life experience. As time passed, they developed their skills even more, but nobody did an identical movements sequence for much time, practicing alone, apart from the friends, if it was not "valid".

For EPA's students, music was not something to be watched, but to be lived, and also, it did not occupy a status position that could be classified as superior among the elements that constituted their lives, demanding, because of this, "adequate" moments to play music. In this meaning, the conception of music, as something inherent to their lives made them to believe that it must be lived, whatever the context and kinds of music.

Final Considerations and Perspectives

The ways as street children and adolescents lived and shared music in that socioscholar context revealed that their relationship with music was influenced by the forms they related with other skills they experienced at school, that were determined by EPA's socioeducational project. Although it was not part of the curriculum, together with other areas of knowledge, music integrated this context of valorization of skills diversity as one more language that enabled the students' self-knowledge, development and expressiveness.

The forms as music was inserted in its quotidian indicate that the quality of students' involvement with music and the accuracy which they experienced it, related to its non-link to status pattern, hierarchy and fragmentation of knowledge and the formality of the relation with it, of "educated society" (ANTUNES, 1997). From this evidence and the experience immersed in the culture of the streets, we would like to call attention to two questions we can think about. One of them is: in what measurement were our way of relationship with music, the values we attributed to different skills of the musical universe and the meaning it has to us determined by historical and cultural patterns built by the society we are inserted and, in what measurement does this determine our musical pedagogic practice? And the other question - resulting from what generally happens in contact with

a culture which is not ours, is that we could also understand, as our social organization is by principle, exclusivist, once it standardizes what is "ideal" to eat, wear, work, live, date, and what directly concerns to us as educators, establishes values to knowledge, throwing the subjectivities of processes of their constructions into confusion (Morin, 2000; McLaren, 2000; Deleuze, 2000). As CRAIDY states (1998, p.22): "the phenomenon of street children is before everything a flow that expresses a wider social exclusion movement and discloses in a particular way in childhood, for it is the most feeble link".

The unprotected childhood, as it disentails from the established world, day by day constitutes a particularized culture whose elements which traditionally comply the culture from a social group, as values, habits, behaviour, arts and language, here, has survival and abandon as basis. That is, there is not another culture alternative. In this meaning, choices and decisions to be taken at the role of musical education with street children and adolescents, must come from a guidance principle that concerns to contents, methods and perhaps principally to objectives which need to be reached: the principle of respect to one's own culture, the street culture. In Brazil, it is stated that "taking the boys out of streets is easy, what is difficult is to take the streets out of the boys". About this sentence, Lemos (2002) comments: "Taking out (by force or not) the boy out of the street while space-place of various forms of violence is easy, but it is impossible and brutal to take someone's culture out"(p.139).

In this sense, the first objective of street children and adolescents is perhaps to propitiate them one possibility of constructing their own culture, through a dialogism between their skills and ours. And, if we value the musical skills that come from the streets and from girls and boys' history to school, we can not leave behind the social, political, economical and cultural aspects which are implicit in their skills.

In conclusion, we want to rebound the relevance that music can have in (re)construction processes of a positive identity of street children and adolescents. Because, as LEMOS (2002) also believes and has hope in identity transference of stigma of exclusion, she states:

It is in an established relationship with the look of the 'other' that the individual creates his symbolical systems of belonging and identification. (...) The identity is not a static essence, but a flowing process of interactions with others and the world. It is in the identity/heterogeneity paradox, in the constant game between being similar and being different that "identity" passes from a permanent concept into a process (p.114).

From this, we believe that the Musical Education that maintains attempted to community and experiential aspects of music can proportionate to excluded children and adolescents moments when they can construct, little by little, another view of themselves, giving them a feedback in the conscientiousness they acquire of their skills, creations and musical performances. More especifically, the musical improvisation can proportionate them a unique experience through a skill, strengthening their notion of authorship, what can disclosure to them that as they are authors of their development and musical production - which are process related, unique and changeable, the same can happen to their identity.

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