

# Spaces for listening and participation in the context of institutional care for adolescents

Carla Cerqueira  
Irene Rizzini



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# *Dedication*

I dedicate this work to each young person and the staff of the URS<sup>1</sup> Paulo Freire who inspired me during the project and who still inspire me and my supervisor, professor Irene Rizzini, in the writing of this text. I am grateful for each story told and retold, each smile given, each tear which fell during the most difficult moments, each open embrace, and each new arrival and departure, each moment learning, and for the many reflections and reinventions which resulted from the union of hands and hearts.

**Carla Cerqueira, April, 2020**



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# Introduction



## Participation as a process constructed in the daily life of the institution

This bulletin is based on a study which analyzed the participation of adolescents<sup>2</sup> in institutions, particularly those young people in the process of leaving the institution as they reached their eighteenth birthdays. It looks at the life of a group of young people in one particular institution<sup>3</sup> and is a reflection on their right to participate and to share in family and community life.<sup>4</sup>

Our analysis necessarily touches upon some strong emotions present in the lives of these young people, many of whom had been institutionalized for long periods of times. Sad feelings of, for example, of abandonment were common. And faced with the daily fact that on reaching eighteen years of age their lives would change again as they would have to leave the institution, other feelings emerged. The age of majority is a period of anxiety and fear for many adolescents and especially for those who often have nowhere to go.

The experiences described below occurred at exactly this crucial moment in the life of the institutionalized adolescents. For this reason, we paid special attention to the feelings of autonomy and belonging that are part of adolescence that could manifest themselves in feeling safer in the place they were at present even though they were living in an institution. While the feelings of autonomy and belonging were rare, it was crucial that they felt capable of following their path feeling more prepared for the outside world.

For young people to feel that they belonged in an institution, conscious that it was not their home or their family, was a major adjustment and a continuous, intentional process of living day to day with the other people both inmates and staff. The same was true of the process of leaving the institution. This process could be extremely sad and reinforce the adolescent's feelings of abandonment and hopelessness. It was, however, a rich opportunity for learning for all those involved and for reframing the experience for the adolescents.

We are describing here the co-construction of places for listening and participating, full of struggles, frustrations and victories. From our perspective, participation is a process constructed in the daily life of the institution.



# The study



Our focal point is the process of young people leaving an institution where they were held in a position of regard. Throughout the study, they were treated in a personal way which respected their individuality and their choices. To protect their identities, we gave them fictitious names of mainly their own choosing.

We used various forms of data including participant observation and constant listening to the voices of the young people.<sup>5</sup> We stress the importance of attentive and respectful listening and the exercise of a dialectic in which the young people can take part and hear their own histories. This process can only occur when the institution offers a secure base in which the adolescents have confidence that they can speak freely. It should be noted that the first author was and is a paid psychologist in the Center for the Defense of Children and Adolescents (a public body) in the cities of Duque de Caxias and Mesquita in the state of Rio de Janeiro with responsibilities in the institutions that are the subject of this paper.

The legal basis for the rights young people have in institutions are established in the Statute on the Child and the Adolescent (ECA 1990) and the National Plan for Living among Family and Community (PNCFC 2004), according to which residential institutions have to guarantee not just a physical structure adequate for shelter but also a place which stimulates the comprehensive development of children and youth.

The abundant scientific literature on our topic frequently points to the negative consequences of being abandoned in an institution (Rizzini and Rizzini, 2004; Wathier and Dell'Aglio, 2007; and Golin and Benetti, 2013). Other studies show that institutional placement is not necessarily harmful or prejudicial. Institutions have the potential to lessen the impact of abandonment or family rejection by means of experiences that can give new meaning to life events (Costa and Rossetti-Ferreira, 2009; Silva and Arpini, 2013; Poker, 2017). Various factors can contribute to positive or traumatic experiences in an institution. Among these experiences are the relationships established with parents and family, relationships with professionals and peers in the institution, the age of the young person, and the manner of separation from the family (Oiveira and Prochno, 2010; Tinoco and Franco, 2011).

In the case of the institution in this study, we observed that it did offer the support and safety necessary for psychological and affective adjustment after the loss of the family of origin, creating with the young person a relationship of trust. The following illustrates those feelings for youth at the point of leaving the institution:

*(...) I achieved many things here. I was able to see things from a different perspective. I had to control myself, not insult others when I was offended. I had to learn to overcome myself. I progressed a great deal here inside the institution with the professional and management staff, with the teachers, the cooks and with other adolescents. Each one, everyone who came and went taught me something. I managed to see things in another way. Now I am almost about to leave [silence as the young person choked up]. I will not manage to go to school without returning and talking to my teacher. I am able to say to her that it is very difficult to return [to the outside world] after being away for such a long time. And she said that she understood and would help me. Before I would have fled. Now I am able to face up to things, to see and know that I am not alone (...).<sup>6</sup>*

Although the institution was only a temporary placement, the young people take institutional memories with them when they leave. Those memories become symbolic support which allows the youth to build a base on which their potential can emerge giving them more internal resources to deal with the barriers that life presents. They know that they have something significant to take with them to mitigate the feelings of helplessness.<sup>7</sup>

When the dynamics of institutional life are co-constructed between residents and staff, that process can minimize the rigid marks of family and social history making it possible for the young persons to get in touch with their feelings and give different meaning to their stories. But for this to happen, it is necessary to understand the young people's subjective view of their experiences in the past, respecting them as communicating beings who establish relationships with their families of origin and the community on their return and with the people whom they live within the institutional setting.

The issue is not only about disconnecting from the institution with which the young person has developed feelings of belonging but also realizing the challenges on leaving in other areas of life such as school, spaces they live in, family and work. It is important that the professional staff does not have answers for everything because it in the face of impotence that the young people can arrive at the point of speaking for themselves. In this way, the educator or staff person gives the adolescents the opportunity to develop and to belong to somewhere, and this place is authorized by the educator (Altoé, 2010).

The feelings of protection and security, which are desired during the shared living in the institution, must not be seen in opposition to the outside world But they should be seen as a way of helping the adolescent develop a sense of autonomy and a way of putting together and organizing resources which strengthen his life once transferred outside the walls of the institution. The young

people must be aware of the possibilities of conflict without become doubtful of their own capacities to construct positive experiences outside the institution.

The journey from the institution to the outside world can be eased in various ways when the institution is seen as a space or agent of shelter and protection. Those who leave do not disconnect themselves from everything when they become independent. It is common for those who leave to return to the institution. They return to tell staff and other young people about their lives or to ask for help about questions of work or access to health care or just to report a change of address.

Our reflections are based on two institutions. The study began in the Unit for Social Reinsertion (URS) in Bangu, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, and continued to a new institution in Campo Grande in the same state. This new institution was name URS Paulo Freire.<sup>8</sup> The move has important implications in the history of the creation of spaces for listening and participation.

## *From Bangu to Campo Grande: how URS Bangu became URS Paulo Freire*

João's account, one of the young people who lived the transition between the two institutions,<sup>9</sup> pointed out the struggle of the change, his adaptation to a new institution and his experience of preparing to finally leave institutions.

*Oh my, aunt<sup>10</sup>. There is nothing easy about leaving here. I have longings for URS Bangu. Here it is good (URS Paulo Freire). There, it was really grim but it had something of the home about it. You saw people and they saw you...*

His words are not simply an outburst or the attachment to another place. We understand that the process of belonging which started in Bangu also required time in Campo Grande. He lived in the former place for seven years where he constructed a protective network. The change shows that it is more than a simple matter of changing homes. We realized that it was important to cultivate the

sense of belonging in the new place.

In October 2018, URS Bangu was moved from its site by a judicial order. Because it was not possible to find an adequate location in Bangu, we moved to Campo Grande.<sup>11</sup> This change created many expectations and anxieties just as much among the staff as the young people, although the change had been longed for because the physical space in the institution in Bangu was very restricted and in bad condition.

Familiarity with the old location left many with good feelings about it despite the limitations the setting imposed. At the same time, to go to a new place raised the possibilities of new practices but also the fear of not being welcome.

A new home required a new name. The young people were immediately consulted and began to suggest various names. This process was assisted by the teachers and staff. The call for suggestions lasted two days in person and via WhatsApp. One teacher used the verb to give hope (*esperançar*). The young people thought that was a mistake<sup>12</sup> and so looked the word up. We came across a definition in the writings of Paulo Freire.

*It is necessary to have hope. But it has to be hope from the verb to hope. Why is that? Because there are people who have hope that derives from the verb to wait (esperar). But hope (esperança) from the verb to hope is not hope, it is expectation (espera). Ah, I hope that things will improve, work, get resolved. To have hope is go forward, to join, not to give up. It is to be able to refuse what rots our capacity for integrity and our active faith in our work. Hope is the ability to look at and react to something which apparently does not have a solution. So it is very different from waiting; we really have to hope (esperancar)! (Freire, 1997, p. 110-111).<sup>13</sup>*

After a lecture on this text and learning a little about the history of Paulo Freire and his contribution to education, the young people and the staff came to an agreement about the name of the institution which came to be known as URS Paulo Freire. The certainty about the name of the institution was summed up in the words of Antonio, "This guy has everything to do with us."<sup>14</sup>



# *“We have the right to live and to be respected” and other questions*

On the very first day in our new home, we received a visit from someone who said he was a representative of the homeowners. He said that that a shelter for adolescence was not regarded well in the neighborhood and that tolerance for the young people was zero. This visit left everyone apprehensive especially in regard to the safety of the youth. Participation in community life had to be constructed. But we knew that now it would be different with the active participation gained by the young people and the staff and the youth knew that they had a place where they could feel empowered as citizens. Joao put it well. *“This place is not just theirs. People are not ready here. We have the right to live here and be respected. I know that we are minors, sometimes a bit nutty, but we are going to change and those who don’t like it can go.”*<sup>15</sup>

Fortified by these words, the young people proposed that we gather and discuss this event. They established rules for living in the community as the place we were seeking to belong. Among the rules adopted were: no use of drugs near to the institution; prohibition on damaging the house or to make a mess; and a prohibition on asking people for money or for anything else which would leave the young people regarded badly. These rules would need to be constantly re-evaluated and revised.

On October 28, 2019, when we had been in URS Paulo Freire for one year, the young residents and others who had already left the institution discussed what had changed. The questions raised included what is different which interferes with daily tasks and what was lost during the move? One of the responses was *“here (URS Paulo Freire) the teachers stay in their room and us in ours. They stay away from us for a long time and don’t talk with us like they used to”*<sup>16</sup> The teachers also had their regrets: *“OMG, I have longings for Bangu. There the conversations were better”*<sup>17</sup>

The staff including teachers, professional staff, and support staff and the manager were the same as in Bangu but something was different. It was not just the place that was different but also the attitudes and this was reflected in the behavior of the young people in their verbal and non-verbal

language to point out that we had to rethink our tasks. We were able among ourselves to point out what we had appeared to have lost including the ongoing conversations, the feelings of belonging and respect for the history of that URS in which each one of us had been part. We also all understood that this conversation was only possible because the practice of participation was already part of the dynamic of the institution.

## *The concept of participation and the process of separating from the institution*

The concept of child and youth participation as a right for young people to express themselves and have their voice respected became entrenched in theory with the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), and, in Brazil, by the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent (Brazil, ECA, 1990). Much has advanced since the 1990s on the rights of children and youth and these principles started to orient public policies in many sectors. But there is still a long way to go on what is now called the right to participation and not just in Brazil (Tisdall, 2017; Collins, 2019; Carrano, 2012; and Rizzini, 2019). The struggles to implement these rights are much greater in the case of children and youth who live in contexts of high vulnerability such as those who live in the context of the streets<sup>18</sup> and in urban occupations or squats (Couto, Vale and Rizzini, 2019). The opportunities that children and youth who are living in some kind of institution have to express themselves and participate in decisions about their lives are practically non-existent. This is, moreover, an issue that has attracted little study (Barros, 2017). According to a review of academic publications between 2000 and 2019 on institutional shelter, the studies that exist show that young people are not listened to by the management of such places.<sup>19</sup> For this reason the youths' behaviors are marked by invisibility and when seen, as misbehavior. Both institutional and public policies are dominated by adult centric perspectives (Orionte and Sousa, 2005). The use of participant observer research methods, however, is a special strategy which gives professionals access to a group of young people and in

addition gives them a view of important aspects of institutionalization. It also gives them insights into the young people's lives as a whole. The institutions themselves can (and should) contribute to the young people knowing their rights and learning strategies to realize their rights (Santana and Avanzo, 2014).

According to Doyal and Gough (1994), participation is an elemental, universal necessity. This idea is also contained in the field of social psychology which recognizes as a basic human condition the inclusion of a person in a group and being valued with all the desires and feelings that each one brings. If it is impossible for a person to participate in society, that person passes through a process of suffering which Sawaia (2010) calls ethical-political suffering.

The document, "Technical Guidelines" published by the Brazilian National Council on Social Work together with the National Council of the Rights of the Child and the Adolescent corroborates this position with the following definition of what constitutes familiar groups: "groups which a person participates in for a long time (family, chosen friends, professional colleagues) which are fundamental for the construction of individual and social identity (CONAS/CONANDA, 2009, p. 97).

The relationships constructed in various contexts (school, family, work and community) will engender ties which together weave a large web which connects us to life. It is these connections which contribute to the development of a sense of belonging and, in the case of young people in institutions, will make a large difference in the process of reinsertion into family, community and society. This process for the youth in institutional services is much more than just leaving the institution. It is a matter of feeling that you are part of something and that this feeling is important to you. The struggles of adolescents in a situation of social vulnerability is much more than the packet of work, place to live, the wise use of money and the strengthening of networks. It is important to take into account the modes of sustenance that these young people will encounter when they are in the world, or the ways of strengthening themselves internally as part of the process of maturing.

The adolescent is the center of this text. The young persons, in their many aspects, have certain unique features which cannot be ignored such as living far away from their families. These are young people who in general had to be separated from their family and community contexts for reasons which can be understood as a violation of their rights, or from negligence or violence which directly affected their families as well as for reasons of drug use, imprisonment, serious illnesses or death (Fukuda, Penso, and Santos, 2009; Cavalcante et al., 2014).

We should at this point reflect on what is understood as adolescence. We know that adolescence is marked by an awareness of having a new place in the world, which can produce confusion, a loss of familiar references, and by a new sense of the body as the body passes through rapid changes. It is a moment in the cycle of life when values acquired in infancy are often questioned and refor-

mulated. It is a moment of the opening of the world where young people assimilate new values by experiencing different groups of people as friends, at school or at church (Aberastury, 1984; Erikson, 1987).

We also know that these changes, along with life challenges, do not show themselves in the same way for all young people (Pais, 1990; Carrano, 2012). The majority of adolescents in this study brought with them histories of suffering commonly marked by separations and feelings of abandonment. At the same time, socioeconomic conditions and precarious living situations strongly affected their lives. It was not unusual for them to experience traumatic experiences of discrimination and prejudices for being young, poor and black (Carlos et al., 2011; Rodrigues et al., 2014). It seems as if the more precarious and challenging the life conditions of adolescents, the more they had to deal with immense, complex problems in the areas of living situation, work, career and earning money. We also observed that behaviors common to adolescents such as defying authority, or experimenting with drugs (many times to be accepted by a group), are particularly unacceptable for low-income youth. They are summarily criminalized. The idea of the minor offender is very present both in the ideology of the professionals who work in the institutions and in society as a whole. (Rizzini and Celestino, 2016).

As the young people think about their institution and arriving at the age of majority, they experience a transition which is both delicate and quite decisive for their lives. They have to leave the institution whether they are ready or not. It is a frightening moment for the adolescents because life in the institution does not prepare them for the world, for life in society where the pressures and demands are immense and where, at the same time, the sources of support are reduced and opportunities almost non-existent.

What is important for these young people leaving the institution? While it is a process that generates much anxiety, it can also signal growth if the youth are supported and helped. As they face their entry into the adult world, the youth are confronted with their potential and their limitations and they think about the challenges they will managing those challenges or circumventing them. The goals of the professionals who work with the young people, through sharing experiences and reflections, are to position them in a safe and constructive social space and help them actively participate in the process of leaving the institution.





# *The right to participate in an institutional context*

The history of the institutionalization of children and adolescents in Brazil has important repercussions for the present. An analysis of the documentary history about services to children during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries shows that a culture of institutionalization was established in Brazil with institutions seen as a permissible destination for the children of the poor and those considered orphans, abandoned or delinquent. Children and adolescents who were historically sent to institutions by the organs of social assistance and the judiciary continued to be seen as a threat to society. While the very large institutions have been closed, there developed a circular trajectory between home, the streets and the institutions of “protection”, trajectories which continue to characterize the current institutional population (Frangella, 2000; Rizzini, Neuman and Cisneros, 2009; Rizzini, 2011). An educational-disciplinary slant persisted in these institutions destined for children from the most precarious social classes.

At the passage of the Statute on the Child and the Adolescent<sup>20</sup>, municipalities became responsible for the care of children and adolescents considered to be in situations of risk or social vulnerability. The services they offered included institutional care. The competent authorities included the judiciary, public defenders, and the guardianship councils for those young people who, for whatever reasons, had their fundamental rights threatened or violated and who were thus exposed to a situation of personal or social risk as defined by Article 98 of the Statute. Institutional services were defined as services for children and adolescents who had their rights violated and who needed to be removed temporarily from living with their families and in their communities (Brazil, PNCF, 2006).

These changes resulted in a reordering of institutional life now aimed at guaranteeing the conditions of survival, social and personal development, physical and moral integrity, and individual attention. Starting in 2013, with the publication of Resolutions 15 and 17 of the Tripartite Management Commission (CIT) and the approval of Resolutions 23 and 31 of the National Council on Social Assistance (CNAS), there began a process of qualified expansion and restructuring of the Institutional Services for children, adolescents and youth up to the age of twenty-one. Qualified expansion meant the introduction of new institutional services in accord with the national parameters. The restructuring of the institutions included a gradual process which involved the management, the

institutions themselves and the users with the goal of making existing services live up to the norms now in operation.

We argue here that the experience of institutionalization for youth can be understood as restructuring their life stories in spaces for listening and participation especially for young people with sad life histories. This is the approach we take to situate the youth as protagonists in their own lives and stories which are told, re-told, and assigned different significance in concert with the staff. The actions of the professional staff in institutions must be very careful, taking into account the psychological and social dimensions and looking to the processes of inclusion or reinsertion into the family, the community and society. Listening becomes a primary tool for understanding the contexts of the youth and their families.

Thus, the models of the past which excelled at long term institutionalization and which ended up reinforcing the abandonment of children and youth gave way to prioritizing the right to live among family and community. This right stems from a variety of laws and policies including the Legal Framework of Law 8069/90 (ECA), the Organic Social Assistance Law (LOAS, 1993), the National Policy on Social Assistance (PNAS, 2004) the National Plan for the Promotion, Protection and Defense of the Rights of Children and Adolescents to Family and Community Life (2006), the Law of Adoption 12010 (2009), Technical Instructions: Institutional Services for Children and Adolescents-Joint Resolution CNAS/CONANDA NO. 1 (2009); The UN International Rights for Alternative Care for Children; and CNAS Resolution 023 (2013) which established the priority of the Single System of Social Assistance (SUAS) with a focus on restructuring institutional services throughout Brazil (Brasil, 2009).

*From the time of the passage of these laws and plans, based on respect for children and youth, institutions started to see themselves as places of caring where the right of young people to participate was respected. However, historically rooted practices are not transformed without much effort and investment of time. The struggles of the professionals who work in the institutions to change the culture of those institutions are enormous. To overcome the obstacles, to trust in and put into practice what seems hardly possible is a very challenging task.*

One important element of change is the recognition of the right of children and adolescents to participate, strengthening the idea that they are social actors, agents of change, with skills hitherto ignored or silenced, yet capable of actively defending their rights in the public spaces where decisions are made about their lives (Rizzini, 2019). In institutional care it is still a great struggle to start thinking about participation as a right, not as a concession from someone.

# *Promoting spaces for listening and participation*

## **Lunch with the family: chicken with okra**

Institutional care for children and adolescents also involves the family in the sense that they are part of the life and sense of permanency for youth in the institutions. It also includes their involvement in the process of leaving the institution, as indeed they are thought of as one of the methods of protecting and reinsertion whether they are the family of origin, the extended family or a substitute family. It is important to remember that the possibility of returning to the family does not always exist. So, the passage from the institution could be an opportunity, perhaps the only opportunity, to help these young people reconnect with their families when they reach the age of majority.

Removal from the family provokes sadness, fear and uncertainty in the young people. These feelings become clearly apparent in their behavior during this period in the form of self-harm, aggression, anxiety, childlike behavior, and insecurity. The following scene demonstrates the delicacy of the moment of detaching from the institution and the return home where both the desire and at the same time the fear of the event touches the young person, his family and especially, in this case, the mother.

Two brothers are the protagonists in this story. We will call them Danilo and Joca, aged fourteen and seventeen respectively. Joca arrived at the institution first after family conflict intensified because of drug and alcohol abuse by his mother and stepfather. Danilo arrived later after a search and seizure which also resulted in the institutionalization of his ten-year old brother leaving the house without any of the children.

The departure of her sons appears to have disabled the mother who increased her use of alcohol. This problem, according to the "protective network"<sup>21</sup> which followed the family, was an element of why it was impossible for the sons to return to the family. We were able to see the effect of this on relations in the family while the young men were in the institution. What was striking for us was how Danilo and Joca referred to their mother as a strong person who was suffering mainly

because of the absence of her youngest sister. This image of a strong woman was from how she appeared when she came to a meeting with the staff at URS Paulo Freire. What we saw was a woman without a life, without the will to struggle for the return of her sons, or who did not know what to do to get them back. It seemed that despair had overtaken her.

We knew that in order to unite this family we would have to listen to this woman. It was also important to involve the sons in this process “to rescue” this mother who seemed to have become lost after her children were taken away. And so we asked the young people to point to a way to help the mother get them returned. At that point, Joca made his first contribution. He said that it was a dream of his mother to return to studying: *“She does not know how to read”*. Daniel’s contribution was: *“I think I cannot return. I am at risk. But I would like to have lunch with my mother. Let’s make a lunch for her here. Her favorite food is chicken with okra”*.

With these two contributions we pulled off a visit to the house of the mother. We gained a short history of the life of the mother who spoke about her loves, her sons, and the happiness that filled her house when they were present. We saw photo albums of the sons including those who had already left, of the grandsons and family trips. We made the young men’s suggestion to their mother and her emotion made her eyes fill with tears: *“They remember what I like. It is my dream to go to school and I adore chicken with okra”*. We suggested that she cook for her sons but she preferred to come and have lunch with them.

On our return to the URS we met the two adolescents and told them about the visit and what she had said about their suggestions. We talked about the school enrollment process her mother would have to follow to return to studying and that the lunch would be the following Sunday.

Meeting the wishes of this family made possible forging a road for the young people’s return to their home. And the chicken and okra were delicious. Among the people invited to the lunch table were other young people in the institution and some staff to enjoy both the food and the stories recounted that day. It was very emotional and an important lesson for all of us.



# Mechanisms for promoting spaces for listening and participation

The staff of the URS Paulo Freire were experimenting with ways to provide spaces for listening and participation. One way was focus groups with particular agendas with the incentive for the young people to participate in the day to day decisions of the institution. Everyone was allowed to suggest the items to be discussed including the professional staff, teachers and the young people themselves. What follows is an example which shows how it is possible to create spaces for listening, and encouraging the participation of everyone involved in the life of institutions. It was an action which we thought promoted a sense of autonomy which much benefited the adolescents and which extended to all the staff.

From the ideas and themes which came up in the listening spaces and from a certain “confusion or dissatisfaction” during meals, the nutritionist of URS Bangu laid out a thematic-culinary workshop to provide the staff and youth of the URS a way of conducting the mealtimes in a more pleasurable way. Mealtimes were usually collective events where the young people, teachers and help staff ate together. In a game like fashion, staff presented to the young people information never before shared with them about what was involved in sharing the meal service. They were given the amounts offered by the city for the purchase of food supplies and, given those limitations, could suggest a daily menu. Gabriel showed us his admiration for the sense of autonomy this gave when he said: *“I really like taking part in the food service workshops. I think auntie’s idea to do this was really good. I remembered my grandmother. I felt a sense of longing!”*<sup>22</sup>.

This exercise in autonomy which emerged from the workshop, changed the meal-time routines in URS Bangu and the process became one of “self-service”. The plastic spoons and plates were replaced with knives and forks, and glass plates. The change came from the young people’s participation. It involved using a little imagination and a lot of courage to make apparently small changes but the changes were significant and spoke of a sense of respect and confidence in what had been discussed and decided collectively. It was clear that the act of being involved in the decision implied

commitment and the assumption of responsibility for the well-being of everyone involved.

We notice another development which we had not expected. It was the relationship between the youth with food, with the kitchen staff, and with life outside the institution. Lorenzo's comments illustrate what happened: *"...I was ashamed to eat on the street because I did not know how to use a knife and fork. Now that is not case. I choose my food and I learned to eat more slowly. I can eat in someone else's house without a problem"*.

What happened was a bit surprising for all of us, but we were happy to demystify the idea that an institutional environment would not permit such a change. It is possible to change but for this to happen it is necessary to create the conditions and sympathy for the ideas and policies among the staff. We did not know, but we guessed that there would be consequences from participation. On this point we agreed with Gulassa (2010) that to change paradigms is to change people, habits and change the way of being and thinking. And a change most profoundly affects values. To conduct such a process demands on the one hand initiative, daring and courage, and, on the other hand, care, consideration, and devotion.

But nothing is easy. One of the kitchen staff showed the difficulty in dealing with the changes which happened in the institution. *"...you are putting a lot of confidence in these children. Now they want to choose what they eat. They made a big fuss to serve themselves. I don't think this will work"*.<sup>23</sup> Later, however, the changes acquired a different significance. The same person remarked *"self-service was the best thing. It gave a bit of extra work but it reduced the waste and stress at meal-time."*<sup>24</sup>

We know that the adolescent responsible for this change came to realize his role. And we repeat the importance of trying as much as possible to make the process collective. This is a struggle as much for the young people as for the adults involved who need to rethink their authoritarianism and preconceptions. For the young people, the struggle is to undo what they always reminded of that they obey without question the authority of adults. What is more difficult for them is to leave behind the attitude of dependency and assume responsibility for their actions. Antonio put this point well: *"Here we chose and give our opinions about lunch and dinner...We know about food. When we are preparing to decorate the place for Christmas, or change the color of the walls, the aunties will ask us"*.

The thematic workshops also stimulated the discovery of new talents. One example was the kitchen work which the young people struggled to get assigned to. At any one time three adolescents were chosen. They were responsible for preparing and serving food for everyone, the young people and the staff. This had the effect of bringing them closer to the staff.

We noted that the workshops and the focus group brought the lightness of playing to the group. As we know, playing facilitates communication (Winnicott, 1975). It puts the conversation into perspective and stimulates listening, making it possible for the young people to play with topics

not easy to talk about.

The importance of the group process was illustrated by João who told us how he felt about the institution reflecting on his prior experiences. For him, the family approach made the difference:

*I did not like my father. I was angry at him. Here I can say this without fear of them fighting with me. Here I can approach my family. In other institutions they removed me from my family and so my anger increased...I returned to talk with my family (João, 2018).*

The possibility of being able to review one's feelings and rethink your losses was important for a young person who could now say without fear that he was angry at his father. He was able to realize that this thought disturbed him and affected his relationships with his peers.

We emphasize that our methodology of using different strategies for listening was accepted easily by the young men at URS Paulo Freire. At times, these strategies as well as the workshops and focus groups and roundtables were requested by them as a form of intervention. This encouraged the young people to be heard as individuals in the general institutional setting and in the psychotherapy offered by the medical staff. One young person remembered well the exercises of listening:

*We knew that we could be heard, that there were people to listen and that we could be heard. This made all the difference in my life. You (staff and teachers) thought that what you said went in one ear and out the other, but no, it stayed in our heads. It made us think.<sup>25</sup>*

A number of studies touch on this issue. For Rosseti-Ferreira et al, (2010, p. 71), "through conversations children and adolescents can learn about themselves and construct their stories so that the experiences told to others encourage the construction of their own meanings about the world and about themselves". Other authors suggest that in order to offer spaces adequate for adolescent reality, it is necessary to promote dialogue which permit their urgencies to surface as well as helping and contributing to their understanding and assimilation of the changes that are taking place with them (Oliveira and Ergy, 1997; Ozella, 2003). This point is made in the Brazilian National Policy on Living with the Family and in the Community (PNCFA, 2006), in which the interests, skills, competencies and necessities specific to children and adolescents are recognized. These young people must be heard and encouraged to engage in social and civic participation.

It is interesting that the mental health services have accepted the idea not just as something for the sick but as a regular part of care for health and well-being.

# *Stories lived and told: final considerations*

During this study, we learned that participation is a process and something that is constructed in the telling of each young person's story and listening to the shared stories of the group. The opportunity to confide one's story to someone who is listening allows the construction of a line of narrative and continuity. The conversation implies that the young person is speaker participating in a conversational relationship in which he can place himself and construct together his own path in the conversation. As he is heard, he is engaging in a conversation and his story is being encouraged in a way that reflects his own life.

It was clear that together with the sad memories which each story contained, the young person gained authority over his own story thanks to the story telling. This allowed the opportunity for creating it anew.

Beyond the rhetoric of family reinsertion which was seen as a mark of success by the institutional services, we perceived "reinsertion"<sup>26</sup> in a broader sense. It implies, for example, having the opportunity to learn to live together with other people on one's return and with one's family, knowing that family life does not always equal living together. And it implies the possibility of making choices and the power to construct a place either together with the family or not, in such a way as to feel that one belongs.

But institutional reinvention is a delicate matter, constructed with difficulty mainly because the old institutional culture is very present in these institutions. The URS Paulo Freire was no different. The phrase which captures the challenges, spoken in the corridors of the institution and by colleagues in the System for the Guarantee of Rights was "It's no use. We are drying ice, there is no way for these young people". It is exactly against this stagnation that we struggle to overcome the challenges which occur every day in an institution.

We are talking about changing paradigms, changing strongly rooted cultures, changing people and ourselves, changing habits and ways of thinking. This process demands that the networks are recast horizontally. This is only possible by a collective effort in which everyone involved can reexamine their practices and emphasizing the full protection of the young people. To work in a



network demands the capacity to deal with different groups, and enter into dialogue for a common objective with the full involvement of everyone involved.

This account does not of course report all the nuances of the process but we think it shows the importance of creating places to hear and ways to participate. For their part, the young people had not only to understand their insecurities about the future but also to look at other ways of thinking about their stories even though those stories were sad. But gaining knowledge of how they felt and thought contributed to a sense of autonomy and confidence in themselves.

This process is a struggle. Often the conditions necessary for the protection of the young people are insufficient. Many institutions have inadequate spaces and badly paid staff without qualifications and the necessary support.

In order to effect these changes, the professional staff must learn the theory and methodologies of this process in Brazilian and other accounts. We hope that this brief report will leave the reader with the sense of the importance of spaces for listening and participation in institutions for young people.



# Notes

1 Technically, the facility is a *unidade de reinserção social* (URS) or a unit for the social reinsertion of young people in the Brazilian protective system.

2 Brazilian laws refer to adolescents as a formal legal category meaning young people between the ages of 12 and 18. In this translation we also use the terms youth and young people to refer to these adolescents following more common English usage.

3 The study institution, previously called URS Bangu, was re-named URS Paulo Freire.

4 Since the passage of Federal Law no. 12010/2009 (Law of Adoption) there has been a large change in institutional care procedures which began to be called institutional accommodation. It is one of the measures of protection signaled in Federal Law no. 8069/1990 and applicable to children and adolescents whenever the rights recognized in that law are threatened or violated.

5 Participant observation is especially useful in situations which few people understand well and where the studied behavior is not easily observable publicly.

6 Antonio, 18 years old, July 2018.

7 The feeling of helplessness appears in the first experiences of life with the result that the person is not complete nor has the means to deal with the mockery of the world, and results in extreme dependency on the help of others (LaPlanche and Pontalis, 1970).

8 Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and philosopher who was a leading advocate of critical pedagogy. He is best known for his influential work Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which is generally considered one of the foundational texts of the critical pedagogy movement.

9 João left institutions in April 2018 having reached the age of 18. He returned home. He had spent some of his childhood and all of his adolescence in an institution. He lived in URS Paulo Freire for two and a half years before reaching his majority.

10 Aunt or tia in Portuguese is a general term of affection.

11 Both cities are about 50 kilometers away from the city of Rio de Janeiro.

12 For the verb *esperançar* does not exist in Portuguese.

13 Free translation from translator.

14 Antonio, 18 years old, October 2018.

15 Joca, 17 years old, December 2019.

16 Social educators, December 2019

17 The professional staff included one social worker, one psychologist, one nutritionist, and one te-

aching expert. There were eight teachers who covered all the day and night shifts with two always on call. The other staff included four cooks, two doormen and two general assistants.

18 Note that the language about young people “who live in the context of the streets” refers both to those without any other home and to those who spend their days on the street and their nights elsewhere including in shelters or with friends or relatives.

19 This review is part of the project “Between home, the streets, and institutions: children and adolescents in the situation of the streets, and in institutions in the State of Rio de Janeiro” coordinated by professor Irene Rizzini (FAPERJ/CNE Cientista do Nosso Estado, 2017-2020; FAPERJRef. No. E-26/202.812/2017). In addition to the review of the literature, in the same project there is also in process field research on institutional care in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Part of the completed analyses are available at <http://www.ciespi.org.br/>.

20 The Statute on the Child and the Adolescent (ECA) is considered a landmark in the protection of children and has as its base the doctrine of the full protection of the child reinforcing the provision in the Brazilian Constitution that children are an absolute priority. Brazil also signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and introduced new legal parameters for all Brazilian children and adolescents without regard to social class, guaranteeing them all full protection (Gulassa, 2010).

21 The full name of this group is the Protective Network of the System for the Guarantee of Rights which followed this family for four year. In Portuguese the two systems involved are known as CRE-AS and the Conselho Tutelar.

22 Gabriel, 15 years old, August 2017.

23 The cook, February 2018.

24 Idem, March 2018.

25 Zyan, aged 17, July 2018.

26 The term implies that the individual has stopped to be inserted at some point in his/her life. This does not make any sense if you think for example about social reinsertion. The same for family reinsertion. One should consider that the fact of living outside one’s familiar context does not signify that one has stopped being inserted emotionally in any way either in memory or imagination.

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# *The authors*

**Carla Cerqueira** is a psychologist, serving at the Reference Center on Social Assistance and the Center for Defense of Children and Youth in the municipalities of Duque de Caxias and Mesquita, in the state of Rio de Janeiro. She also holds a position at the Rio Municipal Department of Social Assistance and Human Rights, working at a residential care unit called URS Paulo Freire. Carla has a master degree in Social Work (the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro) and a degree in Psychology (Fluminense Federal University), as well as in Psycho-Pedagogy and specialization in Domestic Violence (University of Sao Paulo). She participated in the project PETSaude in health technology at the SUS (Ministry of Health). One of her last publications is *Era uma vez realidade talvez: ampliando debates sobre vulnerabilidade social* (Once upon a time: it was perhaps reality expanding the debate on social vulnerability).

**Irene Rizzini** is professor at the department Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (PUC-Rio) and director of The International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood (CIESPI) at PUC-Rio. Professor Rizzini has conducted many research and policy studies and published extensively on children, families and their communities in Brazil and has conducted research in collaboration with colleagues in several countries. She has been focusing on various issues of rights violation, particularly children living in situations of vulnerability such as poverty, violence, urban slums, children and youth in institutions and living or working on the streets. She has also conducted studies on family support structures, children with mental and developmental disabilities and on children in the juvenile justice system. In the past few years she has undertaken research on early childhood and children and young people's activism and their right to participation. Rizzini is the author of several publications, one of the latest being *Crianças e adolescentes em conexão com a rua: pesquisa e políticas públicas* (Street connected children and youth: research and public policies).



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**Irene Rizzini**

Professor at PUC-Rio, Department of Social Work and President of International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood (CIESPI/PUC-Rio).

([irizzini.pucRio.ciespi@gmail.com](mailto:irizzini.pucRio.ciespi@gmail.com))

**Maria Cristina Bó**

Executive Coordination, CIESPI/PUC-Rio.

([mcrisbociespi@gmail.com](mailto:mcrisbociespi@gmail.com))

**Malcolm Bush**

Senior advisor at CIESPI/PUC-Rio and visiting research scholar at the Center of Urban Research and Learning at Loyola University of Chicago.

([mbushciespi@gmail.com](mailto:mbushciespi@gmail.com))



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