

Learning for Life at *Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin*:
Integrating classroom and community experiences in a
neighborhood's mission for social change



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Abstract

Traditional authoritarian-based education practices are arranged in an oppressive structure—one which sees students as sterile receptacles whom should be rid of as much subjective interpretation of the deposited material as possible. This paper is an ethnographic and participatory-observatory study of a school which, contrary to this oppressive system, prioritizes and celebrates the complex personal identities of its members. Born of a local social movement to provide the systematically-marginalized population with pre-primary education, Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin in Uruguai, Bahia strives to create conscientious, active, and informed future citizens through liberatory education. The educators at this school utilize an integrative approach to validate the diverse experiences of each student in their complete life—both in and out of the classroom. Understanding that a dynamic presentation of information allows for personal interaction with the material, they employ creative and differentiated techniques in the classroom to inspire each child to realize that learning is central to their everyday lives. If the learning environment validates the realities of the community, then all the community can become a place to learn. My research objective is to observe and interact with this community in order to evaluate the success of these theories in practice. How can the realms of “community” and “school” be interlinked in order for students to reclaim intellectual curiosity? And how should these realms be integrated in teachers’ lives in order for them to be able to play their key role in the realization of this process? This study hopes to lead to a better understanding of how such liberatory teaching can be made possible by studying the specific example forged by Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin.

Introduction

Brazilian theorist and social activist Paulo Freire lit a torch when he stated that education should be a practice of freedom—a light which illuminated the oppression being systematically enforced by the current social institutions.¹ Most national educational systems today limit learning to passive absorption of “objective” (and therefore “unquestionable”) facts. This leads to a focus on measurable results and effectively strips the learning process of any possible personal or interactive aspects. Intertwined with this institutionalized limitation comes the widely held connotations of learning as simply “school” or “book learning”—and therefore not applicable to “real life.” The only time it is related is generally the concession that higher levels of education affect the earning-power of careers.

I would like to rethink this limited perception of learning. Despite its entrenchment in conventional connotations, learning is more broadly the process in which people encounter, consider, and incorporate new information into their framework of reality. It has undergone an extreme fragmentation in current day schools which rejects the majority of practical, corporeal, emotional, and intra-personal areas of knowledge—knocking them down a hierarchical totem pole so that they are devalued and considered external to and inferior to “academic” knowledge.

This fragmentation denies the multi-faceted experience of each individual, as well as the very concept that these life experiences are instances of learning. Paulo Freire refers to this fragmentation as dichotomization—between purportedly objective knowledge and the personal, experiential, “everyday” knowledge encountered in the other spheres of life. If education is truly the practice of freedom, then it is an act that must be practiced. It is a process that requires vigilant and constant *conscientização*. *Conscientização*, like freedom, is a concept that is only truly applicable to and achieved by individuals. Indeed, his proposal for a new pedagogy of

¹ Paulo Freire, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed.”

oppressed peoples is a process different than most conventional revolutions in that troops cannot be rallied, supporters cannot be convinced, and oppressors cannot be dominated. Instead, the force must be initiated within each person of a society and kindled between people; it must be analyzed and re-analyzed continuously; it must lead to a critical consciousness within that individual, specific to that individual's perception of their relation to reality; it must embrace complexity and subjectivity; and it must optimally create and sustain holistic learning environments.

Learning is more than simply becoming aware of something on a surface level of noticing it—the concepts must be actively considered and internalized by the learner. Friere explains this necessary conscious act [critical consciousness] as a “naming” of one's world which is not a passive transfer of socially-dictated labels, but instead an act in which a presented reality is acted upon and transformed.

Bell Hooks, a black feminist theorist, exists in a context decades and countries removed from Brazilian social theorist Paulo Freire; but from her unique perspective she came to many similar conclusions about the importance of liberatory education. Firstly, she echoes the problem of a currently “socially acceptable psychological splitting wherein someone teaches only in the classroom and then acts as though knowledge is not meaningful in every other setting” (Hooks, p. 44)². She laments the current reality that, despite accessibility of books, news sources, internet, etc., most people who have finished or otherwise left school settings stop studying completely. Instead of finding learning to be the renewed perception of oneself in the world, the average person views it as external and therefore chore-like (instilled by the system that forcefully shaped them).

² Bell Hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*

Another applicable theory, this from a psychological approach, is the recognition of intersubjectivity. Louise Phillips discusses how this phenomenon can be used towards transformative education,³ especially in young children, by acknowledging the diverse interpretations each individual creates in their consciousness after encountering information. Instead of denying the existence of the subjective conceptualizations of each individual, this method embraces it and encourages its critical analysis and recognition in others. In her study, Phillips uses transformative storytelling to dispel egocentric thinking in pre-primary-aged children—“providing a deeply interpersonal and communal context for personal voices to be spoken and heard.”⁴ This environment fosters a natural communitarianism, with tendencies towards patience and dialogue, between all classroom participants.

Unlike the conventional authoritarian divide between teacher and student, the teacher is another human learner integrally caught in the dialectical momentum of continuously developing *conscientização*. They are critical, however, in the turning of the crank that perpetuates this liberatory cycle’s motion. Indeed, educators in Uruguai, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, have acted as catalysts for a transformative pre-primary education that aims to nurture critically conscious community members of tomorrow. This study aims to closely analyze their pedagogical and political vision,—focusing on the integration of in- and out- of classroom experiences of teachers and students. I also wish to ground this analysis in specific classroom applications to better understand how teachers can be the instruments that orchestrate this less-fragmented learning experience, executing it in a way that enriches the school’s own community and enacts social change.

³ Similar or even equivalent to theories of liberatory or democratic education; in her article Phillips sites Greene (1995) as defining “transformative education as teaching for the sake of arousing vivid, reflective experiential responses that inspire students to come together to understand what social justice actually means and what it might demand” and draws a parallel to Freire’s ideas of *conscientização* and critical consciousness.

⁴ She sites Jaffe (2000) for this in her article.

Methodology of Research

My study began when I arrived in the Uruguai neighborhood of Salvador, Bahia, Brasil on May 6th, 2009. I went to Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin, located in Praça Santa Luiza, for both the morning (8 AM to 12 PM) and afternoon (2 PM to 5 PM) sessions every weekday from May 7th until the 26th⁵. I lived in the home of the parents of Luciene Trindade de Nascimento, my advisor and a coordinator at ECLM (Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin), and frequented her home as well, which was situated directly above. Their home was located within one block of the Praça of the school.

My methodology was composed of three main methodologies: participatory observation, ethnographic approach, and a close reading of a local text. My involvement at the school varied, but I would generally sit in on classes, talk with members of the ECLM community, or stay in the coordination office to do research.

During my time at the school, Luciene or Jandayra, the other ECLM coordinator, would usually ask me if I wanted to observe a class that day and then chose a teacher for me. They would choose a different teacher each time with the intention that I would eventually see all seven morning and eight afternoon teachers at ECLM⁶. Upon entering a classroom of ten to twenty children (ages three to seven, depending on the class) I was confronted with the dilemma of being an observer in a quick-paced, dynamic environment. Going into my project, I had chosen an ethnographic approach, which I considered mostly observing and dialoguing with community members. My presence in the room sparked the interest of the children, however, as they hadn't yet developed the social conduct of politely ignoring an "observer."

⁵ Note that Friday classes are 8 AM-10 AM and 2 PM-4 PM. Also, there were approximately 4 sessions I did not attend due to illness or scheduling conflict.

⁶ During my time there I sat in on class sessions with the majority of teachers: Cleide, Roberta, Ednai, Maria Carina, and Adriana in the morning session, and Marilene, Djvani, Cátia, Sandra, and Claudia in the afternoon session.

It was immediately apparent to me that I could not remain a passive observer in this setting. Both the circumstances and my amiable personality urged me to participate in the classroom and be a helper. I felt very aware that my presence had affected the student's concentration, and that I could use that attention to turn their focus back to their studies by facilitating or encouraging their work. This was when I changed my technique from simple observation to participation. Because students did a lot of projects and individual work, there were often times that the teacher could only attend to one small group at a time, leaving other groups struggling and momentarily unattended. Having had a few experiences in teaching myself, I began prompting the unattended students about the teacher's instructions, asking them what they were supposed to be doing, and subtly pointing out areas that could use reconsideration. I tried to observe the approach each teacher took with her students—the way she pointed out errors, how much she would correct them, and what her expectations of their performance seemed to be. The students would call me “Pró”⁷ (affectionate name for teacher) and seemed to see me in the same light as the Arte-Educadors (young assistant teachers). Still, they responded to my novelty with much affection and curiosity—and I am sure shyness, in some cases—which I acknowledge had some effect on the classroom dynamics I observed.

I always brought my field journal notebook and would try to take notes on the classroom activities, teacher-student interactions, and thoughts about the implications of these observations—although often the demand for me to be involved with the children meant it got left behind (or scribbled in by those eager new writers). I would generally stay with one class for the whole session, including snack time and play time, so there were times when it was especially difficult to be holding, much less writing in, a notebook.

⁷ Although they would usually call me this from the moment I entered the classroom, since I was an adult.

While I was participating, however, I simultaneously kept an observer's eye tuned in to aspects of the setting and interpersonal interactions that I felt characterized the space and gave me insight into this environment. My participation actually acted as a means to gather information about classroom dynamics—often the teacher would explain some classroom activity or ritual to me to keep me informed about the current activity, sometimes without my even prompting. Occasionally a teacher would explain other aspects of the classroom, schedule, displayed work, supplies, activities, or teaching methods, although such explanations largely depended on the mood, timing, and availability of the teacher. Many of my most informative informal conversations were casually initiated in passing, such as after most children had left the room or over snacks in the lunch room—simply because during class time the teachers were so busy with the students.

My advisor Luciene was also a large fount of information—I would often strike up conversations⁸ with her while doing research in the coordination office. Her position as a coordinator, as well as her history with the school and familiarity with the staff and community, give her a uniquely attuned perception of the realities of the school.

In addition to these numerous “spontaneous” informal conversations, I planned three more lengthy informal conversations with community members I found representative of the school dynamic. The first was the teacher Ednai, whom Luciene had informed me had also been a student at ECLM as a child. After sitting in on her class I sat down with her in her classroom and entered into a conversation in which I asked about her personal history, the effect ECLM has had on it, her interpretation of the school's mission statement, and how she thinks the home lives of students (and teachers) affect their in-classroom experience, among other things. This

⁸ An approximate total of seven twenty minute conversations—usually with prepared questions on issues that I wanted to know more about.

conversation lasted about forty minutes and was not recorded because it was held before I purchased a voice-recorder. I could understand her quite clearly, so I simply listened and took notes. I also had a conversation with Marilene, a dedicated and experienced teacher who has been at ECLM for fourteen years, discussing roughly the same topics mentioned above (personal history, personal interpretation of ECLM pedagogy, etc.) in the small library room of the school during the morning session when she didn't have class. This lasted about twenty five minutes and was recorded so that I could listen to it again to insure my full comprehension. Also, I decided it would be a good idea to interview a young person who has been involved with the school and the community: an arte-educador (assistant teacher position) named Jessica who was also an alum and member of the REPROTAI network and youth group. Similar topics were covered and I recorded the 10-minute conversation to ensure my personal comprehension; it was held in the lunch room of the school while she had a break.

Using an ethnographic approach, another resource, crucial both to the workings of ECLM and my research, was the professional development meetings of the ECLM staff. Every Thursday evening (for teachers after their afternoon classes) and Friday afternoon (for teachers after their morning classes), there would be a "Pedagogical Meeting" held for that session's teachers by the coordinators, Luciene and Jandayra. In my time there I had the opportunity to sit in on three⁹ of these meetings, which included creative activities, lesson plan suggestions, teacher-to-teacher forums for discussing specific difficulties and successes encountered in the classroom, and informal conversation. In addition to these weekly meetings, there is a monthly "Planning Day" on a Saturday before starting each new monthly theme. I attended on on May 9th from nine AM to six PM in which the teachers worked through personal, pedagogical, team-

⁹ Unfortunately I missed one due to scheduling conflict, but Luciene later informed me about it. Two were cancelled.

building, theoretical, scenario-enacting, and lesson-planning practical activities. I observed and took notes, although I participated in the team building activities in order to raise the comfort level of my peers.

Luciene and Jandayra also acted as my guides to community activities outside of, but working closely with, ECLM—those that stem from the REPROTAI community network (of which ECLM is one sector). REPROTAI's offices are in the school building, and I was acquainted with the administrators and many members, so from time to time they would invite me to happenings. In order to get a better understanding of the work undertaken by the community network, I attended and observed a sexual health and assault awareness workshop at a local public school, a political manifestation at the mayor's office to support the May 18th day against child and adolescent abuse, a trans-neighborhood meeting on community schools, a meeting of the youth group that showcased the results of their workshops, and a cultural celebration of capoeira and African dance in the Praça Santa Luiza court. Before and after these activities, I asked questions to the organizers about their history, organization, frequency, and purpose; however, during these activities I played an almost completely observatory role.

The third methodology I implemented was close reading of a text produced by teachers and coordinators of the school, finished in 2002, called *Proposta Política Pedagógica*. This 80-page booklet contained much detailed information about the background and history of the neighborhood, community network, and school, in addition to a plethora of theory upon which the school was founded¹⁰. Luciene explained that each staff member read this book and discussed the theories within. It also contained specific information about what topics should be covered in the classroom according to age, how they should be presented, as well as

¹⁰ It also included student drawings, which Luciene explained to me was important because it valued their contributions as well.

philosophical, pedagogical, and theoretical musings to support each proposition included. I spent many sessions at the school closely reading and taking notes on this booklet in order to better understand the complex foundation of theoretical pedagogy and the specific ways the ECLM educators provisioned to put into practice at their school.

I think it is also important to mention that, because of my participation and close living situation, I developed friendly, warm relationships with many of the teachers and school community members, especially Luciene and her family, with whom I lived. Because I spent time with them on weekends and in informal situations, I could ask Luciene questions outside of the school walls (although most of our pertinent conversations took place within). Also, this friendship meant that she shared some personal family history with me that gave me a more complete picture of how life in the Uruguai community affects a family, the difficulties overcome, the rhythm of life there, and the way that ECLM has had an effect on an entire family. Because the school is a very informal, friendly environment—it is composed almost completely of locals who know each other in the community as well—I felt that it was important for me to be warm and enveloped into this environment in order to have a more complete understanding of the realities of the people involved in this school, both while they were in it and outside of it.

Definition of Terms

Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin (herein abbreviated as ECLM)- A school founded by the Associação dos Moradores do Conjunto Santa Luiza in 1990, which serves the community of Santa Luiza with free educação infantil (and “primeira séria” of educação fundamental). Major funding partnership with the World Vision organization started in 1999. Located on Praça Santa Luiza in the Uruguai bairro of Salvador, Bahia, Brasil.

Proposta Pedagógica Política (herein abbreviated as Proposta)- The spiral-bound, 80 page booklet created by educators at Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin, which included background information, history, theory, and detailed technique discussion.

Educação Infantil- “Pre-primary” education, or from ages three until six, including: Maternal (age three), Jardim 1 (ages four), Jardim 2 (age five), and Jardim 3 (age six)

Educação Fundamental- “Primary/Elementary” education, or from ages seven to roughly thirteen in Brasil

Rede REPROTAI- the youth group under the umbrella community organization Associação dos Moradores do Conjunto Santa Luiza, which has weekly meetings and includes dance, crafts, theatre, and sexual health/awareness workshops, among other activities.

Liberatory education- the pedagogical theories posited by Paulo Freire which aim to liberate all peoples, including and especially those oppressed by current institutions, through practices of critical consciousness (see: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). Other pedagogical and social theorists have echoed this concept with terms “democratic education” and “transformative education,” so these terms will be used throughout as well.

Conscientização- Portuguese term borrowed from Paulo Freire, further explained by his translator in a footnote as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 35)

Intersubjectivity- a psychological concept which acknowledges the inherent subjective interpretations of each individual, both as they perceive this within themselves as well as amongst their fellow human peers

Educator- all educators at the school, including teachers, coordinators, and Arte-Educadores. I made this distinction to highlight the lack of strict role definition at the school: teachers are not the only ones who pedagogically prepare to be an educator, nor are they the only ones who have an educating effect on students.

Teacher- Specifically the head teachers of the 5 morning and 7 afternoon classes: Cleide, Roberta, Ednai, Maria Carina, Adriana, Marilene, Djvani, Cátia, Sandra, Jaqueline, Mary, and Claudia.

Coordinator- Specifically the team of coordinators at ECLM that handle administrative, organizational, secretarial, financial, and pedagogical-development (among other) issues. This year this includes Luciene, my project advisor, and Jandayra.

Arte-Educador- This position is unique to the ECLM system. These educators are youths from the community who have expressed an interest in the school and gone through an application process explaining why they think teaching is important. After being chosen, they undergo training sessions and then act as assistant teachers, helping to the main teachers two to three times a week. They also participate in Saturday Planning Day activities. Many of these youths are active participants in the rede REPROTAI youth group activities and/or alums of ECLM.

Praça (Santa Luiza)- the square outside of the ECLM building; considered a marker of the Santa Luiza neighborhood; has a fenced cement court open to public and used by school.

Background Information: Santa Luiza and the Founding of a Community School

It is important to understand a bit of the historical and geographic context of Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin in order to conceptualize the situation that compelled the local citizens to its founding¹¹. Situated in the area Conjunto Habitacional Santa Luiza, in the bairro Uruguai on the Itapagipana Peninsula in the northern part of Salvador, Bahia, the school's neighborhood is comprised of approximately 136,000 people (the large majority black and in the lowest fixed-income bracket). The land itself was reclaimed from the Bahia de Todos os Santos's mangrove swamps only as recently as the end of the 70s decade, and is therefore known as Alagados, or "flooded." This region, in the "cidade baixo" portion of the capital, is a 20 million square meter agglomeration of low income families (generally under two minimum wages per household), known for having trash in the streets, large families with many adolescents and children, and problems with drug-abuse, illiteracy, and violence. What is not generally thought of in association with this region, however, are the uniquely rich cultural values including local traditions and celebrations, nor the dedicated ranks of residents trying to break free from circumstances of strife. Community members feel that the abundance of problems and lack of municipal support highlight the racial and social injustices faced by people in this region on a systematic scale.

Incited by these difficult circumstances, residents came together in a committee they called Associação dos Moradores de Conjunto Santa Luiza to take matters into their own hands. A high priority on their agenda was to provide schooling for the young children of workers,

¹¹ And also to understand the context into which I entered to do my research.

especially those under seven years of age who had little to no options for schooling offered by the public system, by forming a free “*escolinha de associação*.” Thus, on March 9th, 1990, Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin opened for classes—subsisting on scarce donations of furniture and supplies for many years until, in 1999, the Canadian organization World Vision offered a grant that allowed the educators to construct their own school space. Now, a decade later, the school is still operating out of this space on Praça Santa Luiza, and the Associação contributes to many different sectors of the community through offices in the space as well. In addition to the Luiza Mahin school and the health post they helped open down the street, their projects include a youth group (REPROTAI), local environment committee, economic development office, technology services (Escola de Informatica Palmares), dance and sport classes, and social/civic work including workshops.

For those unfamiliar with the work of community schools, these are schools founded by groups outside the government’s public system but are free and open to the public. The community school movement started in Brazil in the 70s as many marginalized areas (especially “*favela*” communities on the peripheries of large cities) began to create their own schools in response to the lack of schools provided to them by the government¹². The greatest demand was for basic children’s education—*educação fundamental*. Most community schools were opened only after a long struggle of appealing to the government through protests, petitions, and manifestations that never amounted to any official action. Tired of waiting and fighting, residents took the matter of their children’s’ educations into their own hands. This decision also returned the agency back to a population that had been viciously oppressed and repressed throughout the

¹² Jones de Almeida, Adjoa Florência. "Unveiling the Mirror: Afro-Brazilian Identity and the Emergence of a Community School Movement." p. 3

military dictatorship, valorizing their ability to be autonomous and self-sufficient.¹³ Community schools ended up serving a large portion of the population that had been systematically discriminated against and ignored by official government schools, despite the Brazilian Constitution's guarantee of free and compulsory education for all. Also, rising out of dissatisfaction not only with the country's public school system but also its institutionalized racial and socio-economic oppression, they sought to break free from oppressive structures in the curriculum. Therefore "community schools have been associated with popular education strategies that are more inclusive than the curricula and pedagogy utilized by public schools in that they integrate multicultural and culturally sensitive curricula. In general, these schools are seen as more conducive to personal, social, and political transformation" (Jones de Almeida 2).

Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin's Pedagogy for Social Justice: Theoretical Foundation

In creating a new school outside of the system, the moradores weren't just taking political action, but taking on a pedagogical opportunity—founding their own school meant they could choose to rethink the way schools were constructed. The school founders took on this challenge with much careful consideration; after all, they felt that the children of their population were being done a disservice by the systems in place. As active political dissenters, their dream was to create a system of education that liberated the youths it served—providing them with the skills to think critically about their environment and successfully enact social change. For too long education has been an authoritarian system, one which indoctrinates students with the idea that success is equivalent to one's ability to obey. It reinforces a strict hierarchy of authoritative entities—teacher, administrators—in order to repress the natural tendencies towards questioning and individual opinion-forming. As students go through this system, their uniquely complex

¹³ ECLM's *Proposta Política Pedagógica*, p. 3

entity is forced to conform, adapt to, and accept the specific messages offered as unassailable truth by the institution. Conversely, the founders of Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin believed that students should be given agency over their studies, respected for their personality and complete life experiences, and presented knowledge in a way that allows for them to interact with it before internalization. They worked together to compile and create a “Political and Pedagogical Proposal¹⁴” in order to teach, inspire, inform, and guide their educators towards this vision. Stating in its mission that “education should be interested in the betterment of the quality of life of a human being, orienting them to their needs and knowing their rights in order to become a transformative social agent who is free and responsible” (*Proposta*, p. 15). As a community-organized “Associação dos Moradores,” the group emphasized the formation of dedicated and informed citizens in order to insure the community’s continued betterment. According to the *Proposta*, the school sought “to analyze and define, dialectically, its function of agency in the formative education of thought-producing citizens that, certainly, will play a fundamental role in the future society” (*Proposta*, p. 11). With much foresight, they realized that in order to make permanent change you must create a system that produces change-makers.

Beginning at the Beginning: The Importance of Educação Infantil

Some people devalue the importance of pre-primary education—governed by notions that children this young will not remember anything or do not really need to be challenged.¹⁵ Quite the contrary, it has been shown that this age is a crucial formative stage in which socio-political

¹⁴ This *Proposta Política Pedagógica*, along with informal conversations, ethnographic observations, and participatory observations (see *ISP Field Journal*), makes up the bulk of the foundation for the following assertions—specifically postulated and followed at Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin. Other sources used where noted.

¹⁵ In fact, the Brazilian educational system stresses “basic” education as that which goes from 7 to 14 years of age and puts little emphasis on educação infantil. In fact, in a 2001 study it showed that less than 40% of children under 7 were studying—an improvement over former years. (Schwartzman, [The Challenges of Education in Brasil](#))

indoctrination and establishment of social “norms” begin to shape the way children perceive and interact with the world around them. Regardless of age—a measure of discrimination used surprisingly often to deprive a being of her rights¹⁶—a child is still a human being, and therefore a historical and social subject inserted into and perceiving society’s organization (*Proposta* p. 18). If schools have typically been used to instill obedient, competitive, result-driven behavior then it seems feasible—and quite revolutionary—to use this same process to create pluralist, artistic, self-actualized, and dialogue-centric future citizens. As Luciene Nascimento, a coordinator at Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin and my project advisor, affirmed on many occasions, this school’s approach is “planting the seed” of liberatory thinking. After all, the process of human consciousness is one which builds off of previous experiences; forming and nurturing conscientious entities from the beginning seems more effective than attempting to “undo” years of complacent socialization. Not to mention that the attitudes they form early on towards the entity “school” will color their experiences and behavior in each subsequent phase of schooling. A student whose self-esteem and creativity has been stimulated and nurtured in their first schooling environment—instead of stifled or disciplined—will be more likely to internalize learning as important and central to their life. In Luciene’s words, “this seed planted in the student will flower later, forming citizens who will fight for their rights, who will be more aware, who seek to will form a society more just and equal” (*ISP Field Journal*). Additionally, the array of “knowledges” in life is more varied than most academic settings allow for. Life does not only occur while one is seated watching a blackboard. This is why ECLM stresses the benefits of simultaneously developing seemingly “non-academic” forms of knowledge that are equally

¹⁶ Bell Hooks mentions a similar statement, “Incompetence in teaching is tolerated because the consumer is a young person seen as having no rights.” (*Teaching Community*, p. 80)

crucial to overall life experiences such as motor skills, artistic expression, emotional development, and social interaction.

Mediators of Knowledge: The Teachers' Role

A difference approach to education must rely largely on the role of the primary educator—the teacher. A change cannot be achieved if the person spending most time interacting with a child does not change from the traditional teaching methods to a more liberatory approach. In Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin, teachers are “the directly responsible entities for the concretization of the pedagogical proposal” (Proposta p. 12). Contrary to the current structure of most public school systems, education is not an objective transfer of pre-packaged knowledge particles; in fact, like most human interactions, the student’s reception is highly dependent on the way the idea is presented. How the student encounters a concept will affect to what extent they decide, consciously or subconsciously, to internalize that information (a process known as learning). Therefore, needless to say, a robotic one-way delivery system is not sufficient to engage the minds of a complex and diverse student body. At ECLM, they believe that first the teacher must also have learned—not only the material itself, but the context, history, significance, and possible associations for all material. After going through this critical process for every subject matter, a teacher must associate the pedagogical work they do with a lucid activity for the children, like pictures or a game, so that they benefit from the pedagogical work but meanwhile encounter it as interesting¹⁷. The work and creativity put in to every (seemingly “simple”) lesson plan, therefore, is quite impressive.

These standards are not simply proposed in the *Proposta*, but upheld by members of the ECLM school in numerous ways, as will be discussed throughout this paper. Luciene, for

¹⁷ (Luciene, *ISP Field Journal*)

example, demonstrated her consistently high standards when it comes to the role of teacher while she conducted a job-replacement search for a teacher vacancy. “In the classroom you have to tackle many issues, and it’s not easy, really. If you are here because you simply need a job, then this isn’t worth your or my time. The number one thing I am looking for in a teacher is her desire to be a teacher. This isn’t just a job; teachers are the leaders of lives,” she explained to three candidates on May 21st. I observed her express these sentiments, among others in line with the pedagogical theories of the *Proposta*, unwaveringly to each candidate who came in to her office seeking the job. She explained the school’s mission statement as well as why it differed from other schools—and therefore why the teaching position had different demands than other schools. She then told each candidate to return each afternoon for the following three days, prepared to sit in on a different age-grouped class each day and then present a creative lesson activity to each class while being observed by the teacher, including controlling behavioral issues in an effective but non-authoritarian way. Her expected criteria, which I heard her discussing in relation to the candidates, included initiative, warmth, creativity, inquisitiveness, and ability to keep students on-task. The quality of desire to be a teacher, which affects initiative and inquisitiveness, was very important to her idea of the pedagogy because if one’s heart is not in it or one does not take on the mission as a personal mission then they will most likely give up when they realize the amount of work and dedication it requires. In fact, the vacancy in question was due to a teacher who had wanted to be a teacher but did not seem to internalize the importance of pedagogical and planning meetings—missing some crucial ones because they fell on a weekend that she did not feel the need to sacrifice. This desire creates self-motivation within each dedicated teacher to be the best they can be for the sake of their students. As Luciene stressed, “the most important thing that I am looking for is your internal desire to be an educator,

because work in this school is different. It's not just within the four walls of the classroom. You have to be willing to plant a relationship with the children, and even with the parents, fellow teachers, and pedagogical coordination... We are working with the formation of people here" (5/12/09).

Working towards an internalized valuation of learning: integrating in and out of classroom experiences

With even the best intentions, teachers can only do enough to facilitate their students' learning process until the point where the child makes an autonomous decision whether or not to internalize the material offered. Much like the importance placed on the teachers' desire to be a part of the teaching process, it is utterly essential that students *want* to be a part of the learning process. First attempting to use Paulo Freire's liberatory teaching techniques, educators at ECLM soon realized that young children required a slightly more differentiated approach, with constant variation of activities to keep them engaged. These educators believe it is possible to present necessary content areas—such as reading, writing, and mathematics, for example—through creative approaches that will capture students' attention. "The teaching methods should favor the correspondence of this content material with the interests of the students, creating the possibility that the subjects will recognize them as instruments of their comprehension of reality" (*Proposta*, p. 17). This again brings up the key concept that what students learn in school should be understood to correlate with their complete "comprehension of reality." Traditional systems of education generally break up and strictly define areas of knowledge, dividing them not only from out-of-classroom experiences, but with other areas of knowledge as well. The division from out-of-classroom experiences externalizes the learning from what the child most likely considers

“real life” (home/community experiences), and runs the risk of seeming potentially dispensable or optional from that “real life.” The division from other areas of knowledge results in a limited number of strict, fragmented categories—allowing for little to no interrelation between the conceptualizations.

At Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin, educators have created and successfully employed teaching strategies that allow for continuity between different subject areas. As most out-of-school situations call upon many different areas of knowledge, this approach prepares students to tackle complex circumstances with confidence. Also, the cohesive flow from one topic to another provides a more natural, defragmented presentation of information. For example, one day in Pró Cleide’s classroom, students had snacked in the classroom and were passing up the plastic cups from which they had sipped juice. As Cleide collected them she asked the class, “Who can tell me how many red cups are on the table?” (5/7/09). Even though this was not a defined time for a mathematics lesson—in fact, the students had not even perceived any transition from snack time—they were excitedly offering their count of red cups on the table, which evolved into a short exercise on counting, listening¹⁸, and colors. Every situation can be made into an opportunity for learning.

This year, the entire school has adopted a general theme of “Africanidade” to celebrate the rich array of histories and cultures descendant from the African continent. Under this theme, each month has a specific project; first was “A beleza de todo nós” [The beauty of all of us] which discussed personal self-esteem, hygiene, and family, especially surrounding black identity; April was “A beleza de nosso povo” [The beauty of our people] which looked at another important group of oppressed people in Brazilian history—the indigenous population; May was “Contos Africanos” [African Tales] which showcased the importance of story-telling and oral

¹⁸ When one was held in her hand she reminded them “I said *on* the table.”

histories in African culture, while also introducing aspects of African cultures and wildlife through folklore. These “projects” were utilized as a kind of guide rope off of which other activities could be structured and yet all be tethered to a common thematic ground.

One good example of the way the project’s theme could tie together various aspects of a class session was the class of Cleide’s mentioned above. They had been finishing up the project “A beleza de nosso povo” about indigenous culture; the walls were covered in artwork they had done of indigenous people and animals, crafts of bows and arrows, maracas, aipim, feather headdresses, and words that originate from indigenous languages. They first learn an indigenous recipe of tapioca with coco. Then they walk up to the kitchen area and watch part of the recipe process. While waiting for it to set, she goes over the recipe with them again, and then writes “TAPIOCA” on the board. Separating the syllables of the word, she goes through each syllable and its related ones (ex. TA/TE/TI/TO/TU, PA/PE/PI...CA/CE... etc.) and ask the students to combine and create new words from these options¹⁹. After students work on this for a while, volunteering answers collectively, they take some feather headdresses and “traditional indigenous wear” (all student-made from recycled materials and school supplies) and dress a few students in them. They are practicing their enactment of an indigenous story they learned—both actors and narrator played by students. Later they eat the tapioca treat and sing a song that includes all the words on the list “Indigenous Words” on the wall. They color a paper with which they each make a homemade “peteca,” or indigenous ball toy, and are allowed to play with it in the classroom for a while. “Peteca” was also one of the words written on the board during the “Tapioca” syllabic lesson, and Cleide reads a short explanation of its history while they play. Finally, to wrap up, she asks them to draw what they think of when they hear “A Beleza de

¹⁹ This method of syllabic “alfabetização” (literacy) was promoted by Paulo Freire in his works, although I am not certain whether her use comes from this theorist or is just a common method of Portuguese literacy.

Nosso Povo” and most draw people with feathers and bows and arrows. This example is meant to illustrate how successfully a consistent, flowing theme can be woven through an extremely differentiated lesson—combining visual, culinary, syllabic, oral, reading, participatory, artistic, acting, athletic, musical, and creative activities.

Many of these activities were creative, interactive, and exciting to the children, which highlights the importance of making class concepts vivid and experiential, even though they are within the classroom. During the time of the “Contos Africanos” project, I observed many teachers pull students closer to the book, and the book closer to the students’ experiences, by enactment, comparison and participation. For example, as Marilene read her story “Bruna e a Galinha da Angola” with expressive zest, she also paused to ask her young students questions such as “What sound does a chicken make again?” and “Has your mom ever made chicken for dinner?” in order to illustrate the relation the story had to their personal life experiences. Adriana also engaged her students with her African tale, “O Filho do Vento” by allowing them to act out certain parts such as hugging a partner or doing a handstand, or dialogue about other parts such as personal experiences they have had with keeping promises and what is the social code for abiding by one’s word. Also, some popular approaches to phonics and reading were done through allowing the students manipulation of letter or syllable “tiles” (pieces of laminated paper). Overall, I noticed a widespread attempt by teachers at ECLM to find ways to make the topics covered in the classroom contextualized for the student through vivid, concrete, and varied activities. Through encounters with various concrete exercises and games, students must stretch their understanding of a topic to see the complex way it embodies all activities—leading to a more complete and nuanced grasp of that concept.

Educating Citizens: Inspiring Social Awareness in Children

Viewing knowledge as inherently interconnected with their everyday life, students are more inclined to think critically about the overwhelming “non-academic” situations affecting their realities.²⁰ Learning in a school that was founded in an act of dissent against the systems in place, students are reared in an environment that rallies around activism instead of squelching any hint of opposition. Indeed it is named after a nineteenth-century Afro-Brazilian female revolutionary, Luiza Mahin. This Bahian woman was the leader of the Revolta dos Malês in 1835, as well as the mother of the well-known abolitionist and poet Luiz Gama; she is an icon of strong, negra [black] woman in local political history²¹. Continuing in the spirit of this naming, each classroom in the school is named after a ground-breaking Brazilian woman²². By naming the daily spaces of these students after these inspiring cultural figures, ECLM educators are demonstrating the honor, validation, and support they give to the struggles of these women in history. This helps create an environment of social empowerment.

In the school’s daily schedule, there are definite instances of social consciousness as well. Some days the whole student body (of morning or afternoon session, separately) would come together before classes and discuss issues, sing songs, hear stories, listen to announcements, or a combination of these things. The educators presented issues pertaining to life outside of school—for example, telling an informative story about a child who asks their parents about dengue fever and learns not to leave still water or trash on the street—and held events to raise awareness about commemorative dates and their importance, such as May 25th Africa Day. On May 18th, the Day against the Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children and Adolescents, the all-school meeting

²⁰ “Education at its best is empowerment, liberation,” Bell Hooks says in her book *Teaching Community*. “Since our place in the world is constantly changing, we must be constantly learning to be fully present in the now.” (p. 43)

²¹ *Relações Raciais na Escola: reprodução de desigualdades em nome da igualdade*, coordinated by Mary Garcia Castro and Miriam Abramovay, UNESCO 2006.

²² Some examples include Clara Nunes, samba dancer and singer, and Anastacia, resistant slave icon.

had balloons, music, songs, and African dance performances from the youth group members, as well as speeches from administrators, coordinators, and community-group members that addressed some anatomical, emotional, and legal information about child abuse. In this meeting, community members, youths, educators, and students alike mingled, talked, sang, and listened. Children were included in the participation of this dynamic event—actively engaging them in a socially conscious moment with their fellow community members. Instead of being disenfranchised by an authoritarian system which excludes them from “adult” activities, these children are empowered by their inclusion. In their mission to create the community’s leaders of tomorrow, the school is actively infusing the students in a spirit of conscientious activism and social responsibility.

How Public and Private Schools Fail

I have already discussed why theorists criticize traditional institutions of education, as well as why the Escola Luiza Mahin community rejects their oppressive methodology in favor of liberatory approaches. It is still important, however, to analyze the reasons these community members give for purposefully avoiding the public and private schools near them.

Time and time again I heard the sentiment expressed that ECLM was “different” than other schools. Upon asking why, I often received a sentiment that “they just don’t care there [at public and private schools].” Indeed, in a conversation with teacher Marilene, she emphasized this sentiment numerous times. “I’ve worked at a private school, but...there isn’t this sensitivity, this way of touching... You don’t really look at the children... You just give the material and then it’s over, you leave. You only make lesson plans for one type of child... and just don’t worry about each child like we do here. It’s different” (5/22/09). Luciene further explained that

teachers at public schools are municipal employees, basically guaranteeing them a fixed-income position until they decide to retire. This creates little to no motivation towards improvement or development as a teacher—and these qualities are not particularly stressed in their work environment either. Private school teachers, she said, have only a little more accountability, but only to the parents who pay their salaries—not to the individual students themselves. I witnessed references on multiple occasions of public school teachers treating the students like “robots,” “objects,” or “machines.”²³ “I look at my high-level courses at the university and know that, sure, if I went to another place I would earn well, but then I wouldn’t be working with humans, with warmth” (Marilene 5/22/09). One teacher, Claudia, works at a public school during the morning session before coming in to teach her afternoon class at ECLM. Luciene explained that “one was for the money and one was for her heart.” Another example of this systematic indifference was made apparent to me in my home stay situation—Luciene’s father was attending classes at night to complete his high school education. Every night he would go to the school, prepared for all four classes, but would usually arrive back home early because of canceled classes. Almost nightly, one to three of his classes would not have occurred because the teacher or students did not show up for various excuses—weather, sick relative, etc. This lack of concern consistently devalued the effort he put into his studies.

This lack of warmth and sense of community undoubtedly affects the experience of students of these schools, especially those who experienced the way a school environment could be at Luiza Mahin. Ednai, a current teacher and an alumna of ECLM, said that when she transferred to a public school she perceived a shocking difference. She made no qualms about saying bluntly “No one cared about me. It was me looking out for me” (5/20/09), and adding “if anyone struggled at all it was easy for them to just get left behind.” Luciene confirmed the

²³ Luciene (see ISP Field Journal) and Marilene (5/22/09)

apathy inherent in the public school system, and also the apathy that it inspires in young people to feel towards their education. “If you talk to a young person and ask them what they think about their [public] school, they are going to be very negative. They will say that they are just holding out until they finish and can move on with their life.” It seems apparent that the system of “objective” apathy in place harms the spirits and potential futures of its constituents.

Learners as People: How Students’ Home Lives and Identities Enter the Classroom

To this day, care and conscientiousness are commonly viewed as optional qualities in a school environment. Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin believes the opposite—they work hard to recognize and value each student’s unique way of experiencing life. This requires the educator to utilize a patient perceptiveness which strives to really know the educated one—“about their life, their way of life, and their way of survival” (*Proposta*, p. 16). Marilene stressed that, to counteract students who seem to give up in school, teachers should always be “observant and really know and care for each child, because probably she just wants to be noticed and cared for” (5/22/09). Indeed, students’ experiences in the classroom are colored by their personal history, current mood, physical state, and social comfort. One size does not fit all—the teacher must “learn to learn with the reality of the student” (*Proposta*, p. 16) and use that perception to adapt to them.

Even at the young age with which they enter *educação infantil*, children have begun a process of knowledge-acquisition—forming words, understanding family dynamics, creating games, and becoming familiar with people, places, objects, and rituals. Luciene explained this to a teaching candidate, stating “a lot of people don’t realize that students already bring knowledge with them to the classroom, things that they already know from home or the streets. This is why

we say that teachers must act as mediators, to respect what the child is already cognizant of, but also to be organized and have a routine in order to facilitate their continuous learning and developing of those cognitions” (*ISP Field Journal*). In fact, it is common practice at ECLM for teachers to begin each unit with a moment for reflection on “Levantamento Prévio” [Previous Survey], getting an idea of what conceptions or misconceptions the child has already absorbed about the topic.

Another advantage of the educators coming from the very same community of the community school is that they are familiar with the way of life of the neighborhood and often even know the families of the students personally. In fact, all teachers and coordinators I observed during pick-up and drop-off time recognized and knew the relation of almost every person who came for the children; indeed, in my conversations with Ednai and Luciene, they said that they knew almost every of their students’ home situations. These home situations vary widely and can have a large effect on the student in the classroom, including their self-esteem, motive to succeed, respect for adults, and interactions with peers. Ednai mentioned one student who had been having behavioral issues and revealed that his father is a drug-user. The mother will tell him to go to sleep, but when his father comes home he contradicts her and lets him stay awake. She explained that this undoubtedly enters the classroom; when she sits with him to explain something he does not think he has to listen because he is accustomed this discourteous behavior with his mother. Still, Ednai seems understanding in her recounting—even hopeful. “At a public school, they would just tell him to shut up” she explains “but here we understand that they have already started learning and being formed at home. So we want to work with them, to save them from negative circumstances if that is the case. We want to create an environment where they can receive the things that maybe they’re lacking at home. We want to show them

that they can succeed, that they have the solutions within themselves” (5/20/09). This is a moment some students might not experience with their parents.

Reinforcing the capability of each student as an individual is another key ideology of ECLM educators. Each student should be recognized for their differences but, at the same time, every child needs to be uplifted to a level of esteem that will perpetuate their self-motivation. “A child who believes in their own creative potential develops with ease” (*Proposta* p. 13). Educators at ECLM allow students to try challenging activities and encourage them to develop the thought behind their answers. They believe that a well-thought out “wrong” answer may be more successful than a thoughtless “correct” one. With patience and further explanation from the teacher, the student will most likely arrive at the “right” one in time—proud of the thought journey they made to arrive there themselves. Explaining the reasons behind wrong answers and prompting new attempts can be successfully adapted to situations of behavior-correction as well. For example, Ednai related an instance where students began using pencils as weapons to harm colleagues. Instead of simply reprimanding them constantly, she gave a lesson on pencils—how they were made, why we have them, how to hold them—and she never had a problem with improper use again. I also heard “May I continue with the lesson?” from teachers many times in rowdy situations, or an explanation of when the correct time to play and converse with colleagues was. Children respond to—and deserve—respect. If we want them to be capable thinkers we should treat them as such.

Even in frustrating moments, teachers are encouraged to remain aware of their effect on students’ valuation of self. Paulo Freire contends that any interaction with a student that “hinders his or her pursuit of self affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with

the individual's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human" (Freire 55). I notice the awareness of this notion expressed at ECLM when, after a school-wide presentation of final projects to conclude the "Beleza do nosso povo" unit, educators in the weekly pedagogical meeting discussed the teachers' actions when the children had stage fright. "By getting agitated and doing it for them, it negated what they were doing and gave them a sense that it didn't go well. We have to be careful because we want our students to leave with high self-esteem!" coordinator Jandayra voiced. Teachers were open to discussion; one offered to the group how her class discussed the outcome of their performance together afterwards and things they could do differently the next time. (5/8/09) This illustrates how consciously the teachers work towards building the self-esteem of their students.

A sense of self-worth is also nurtured by validating the cultural and racial heritage of the community's largely Afro-descendant population through emphasis on history, narratives, artwork, music, and physical expression. Unfortunately I do not have sufficient time to discuss this in the depth it deserves, so this topic is reserved for further research with the school.

Teachers as Learners: The Importance of Strong, Continuous Professional Development

Educators at Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin frequently affirm "I am always learning." Unlike the pompous and competitive environments of many work places, they are encouraged to reevaluate their methods and ask for suggestions. After all, given the task of "working with lives, not objects," they must be willing to continuously strive to understand the complex, changing realities of those lives and how best to reach them. The *Proposta Política Pedagógica* states the school's objective "to stimulate the permanent formation of the teachers through participation in courses, seminars, and pedagogical workshops" (p. 13). In fact, four teachers are currently

enrolled in pedagogical courses at night; three already completed studies at a particular pedagogical school (while teaching), and four have completed studied at the federal university. Luciene stresses however that while external courses are important, they offer more theory than practice. All educators at ECLM participate in weekly pedagogical meetings and a monthly Saturday “Day of Planning” which utilize differentiated techniques towards personal and professional development (admirably acting as a model of the very techniques they promote). They stress the importance of remaining vigilant, conscientious researchers, creators, and planners for their classrooms in an open, constructive environment. One pedagogical meeting I observed opened with “Let’s evaluate ourselves and the performance yesterday, without competition or stress... Let’s all learn from this and each other to see the work being done here” (Jandayra 5/8/09).

As previously mentioned in my section of the teacher’s role, educators go through an entire process of research and critical consideration surrounding all topics before teaching them. As I witnessed on the 5/9/08 Planning Day, they live up to their pledge of dedication—coming in at 9 AM and listening, participating, and working until 6 PM in preparation for the project “Contos Africanos.” They discussed personal, emotional, and current local social issues; they did team-building activities; they had presentations and discussions about critical pedagogical issues such as manner of speaking with students and interpreting elevated pedagogical theory in one’s own words. To start discussing “Contos Africanos,” they learned facts about Afro-descendancy in Brazil and discussed why choosing this topic was related to their identity and that of the community. They did an activity that was later revealed to be an allegory for a complex socio-

historical concept²⁴. They then utilized activity books and resources to write up detailed “Projetos Mensais” [Mental Projects] which documented their systematic thinking about the monthly theme and how they planned to incorporate its implications into their classes (this process took hours). In addition to this document, they are each encouraged to keep complete daily lessons in a lesson plan book, complete with objective, justification, differentiated discipline, and procedure.

Again, the consistent high standards of the coordination team encourage the teachers to rise to that expectation. And, commendably, they hold themselves to the same high standards²⁵—structuring their “classes” (educator meetings) according to the ECLM philosophy. For example, they chose an African story for the coordination room and used it as a theme for the pedagogical meetings amongst educators. They started the meeting with an activity that could be done in the classroom which tied together the theme of the story, words from the story, practice with letters and syllables, writing, and an artistic product which decorated the space. Then they brought up issues that may need to be addressed in classes and the teachers dialogued about anecdotal problems and successes. In these meetings I generally observed a wide range of actions: conversing, debating, laughing, exaggerating, discussing, questioning, friendly teasing, and telling student anecdotes from the past.

The warmth of the environment fosters professional development. One day I witnessed a teacher, Sandra, proudly showing a basket of syllables that she had just made and explaining to a colleague the accompanying game she had created to go with the African story they were learning in her class. After commenting to Luciene how nice it was to see a teacher taking pride

²⁴ Three volunteers picked a personal object to tell a story about, but then were forced to switch; this illustrated, on a smaller scale, the sense of injustice and despair suffered by slave and slave-descendant peoples stripped of their personal culture.

²⁵ I, personally, was very impressed by this. In my experiences people with a more administrative position tend towards hypocrisy on the basis of the authority dynamic they wield.

in her creative accomplishment as well as generously and warmly sharing that success, she shared with me the surprising story of Sandra's progress. Last year Sandra was struggling so much in the classroom that they had almost let her go. Luciene said that Sandra had a lot of difficulty coming up with creative lesson plans and viewed the class as one homogeneous whole instead of making connections with the individual students. In a two-to-one coordination team decision, they decided to keep her on the staff for one more year, but to work closely with her and switch her to a class of younger students in the afternoon session (Luciene, ISP Field Journal). "It was like she just woke up" Luciene says about the amazing transformation of Sandra into the dynamic and compassionate teacher I knew today. Without the support, patience, and inspiration provided by the members of the Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin community, I doubt this success story would have been given the opportunity to occur. Once a teacher fully grasps the important objective of their role as a teacher and internalizes it, she becomes eager to constantly learn and grow as a "leader of lives."

Teachers as People: The Importance of Identity-Formation and Peer Support in the Total Life of a Teacher

The women of ECLM²⁶ do not believe that acts of friendship, compassion, and emotional support should ever be considered "contradictory" to being professional or serious in their work. These concepts are the opposite of mutually exclusive—they are in fact complimentary to the total experience of being a committed human being. Each member of the ECLM community carries a special history within her, and she is never asked to shed or ignore this story by her peers. The concepts discussed under "Students as People" surely apply to everyone entering a

²⁶ I use the term "women" to describe the staff because of the overwhelmingly female presence in the school. *All* of the teachers and coordinators are women. All of the supporting staff are women with one male exception, and there are three male Arte-Educadores (young assistant teachers).

space, and teachers are not an exception. “Often we see the person on the outside and don’t know what’s going on in the inside,” Luciene observed in a conversation on 5/26/09. “We are a family; we need to be linked and to be able to support each other when something comes up.” They honor the diverse palette of life circumstances present in each group dynamic and leave space for personal issues in meetings. They recognize that a “taboo” on “feelings”—which is perpetuated as neatly “objective” by the modern technological movement—would be counterproductive to the holistic growth they wish to foster in their space. They focus on activities that will strengthen their self-identities and meta-cognition in order to elevate their teaching as a result. “I work in a place that cares about my profession *and* my life... We participate in activities that mesh with our selves” (Marilene 5/22/09). “This space feels like mine. Not because I can come in and just take whatever I want, no, but because it is a space of autonomy, where I have built myself,” Sonia shared in the 5/9/09 Planning Day meeting. This meeting opened with everyone standing in a swaying, interlinked circle. As music played, they sang along and many cried—in a way that was very personal and trusting. After this powerful moment, some shared what in their life had spurred the emotion, although others preferred to decline an explanation. Luciene offered, “We cannot know why the tears fell, but they came, they fell, and they left.” Pain is present but should not be dwelled upon to the point that it keeps you from further actualizing yourself. Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin may be a pre-primary school, but it is also a space where these women can achieve that actualization. “It was here that I have been recognized as a woman, it was here that I have been recognized as a mother, as a professional, learned to defend my rights, learned also to fight [batalhar], learned... all of this to be able to teach” (Marilene interview 5/22/09). The personal journey is inseparable from the professional growth.

The educators' identities as community members are never shed. Even as they don the hat of "teacher," "coordinator," or "volunteer," they remain the intact human being that continues out the door after class ends. As community members, they don't hesitate to dialogue with students outside of the classroom, walk a remaining child home, or offer their time to help peers in their daily lives²⁷. In fact, one day I was walking back from the bakery after school with Luciene and her husband, and we saw a line of yellow shirts²⁸ walking across the *praça* carrying large items. Luciene explained that a teacher was moving and asked if I would help them as they moved all of a teacher's items from her old home to a temporary residence where she and her daughter would be living while the government constructed apartment buildings. Without a second thought, I was soon clutching a large mirror and a stuffed bear along side the ECLM teachers, coordinators, and Arte-Educadores that the teacher had naturally thought to ask for help with the task.

Looking out for one another is not a requirement, but a natural tendency for these residents who have dedicated their time and energy to the community's betterment. Perhaps this is why a large number of ECLM educators are visible local activists. They made up the large majority of Santa Luiza community members present at the mayor's office manifestation on May 18th and many are workshop leaders for the REPROTAI youth group.

Their development in the space of the ECLM also affects their lives within their home, often with their children. Marilene explains "You see, the life of my daughter isn't different than other students' lives. But I constantly sought more because *I* was different. I worked in this institution—I don't strive to, I don't have to, and I don't want to be equal to other mothers because I want to be different." Ednai echoes that she tries to reinforce what her daughter learned

²⁷ Such as running into a student and their family on the bus or picking up bread for a colleague one day after class.

²⁸ Everyone at ECLM wears a yellow uniform shirt; also, members of the Associação dos Moradores have almost identical yellow shirts.

as a student here, even now that she had moved on to a private school for educação fundamental. She wants to fortify the lessons of being a self-motivated leader and of valuing her unique identity, even if it feels like she is being an ECLM teacher at home, in a way.

The question of one's own self-identity also is challenged through professional development. As Ednai says:

“We have classes and seminars and meetings on many subjects and it has really helped me with a lot of things, especially about the issues of race and gender, for example. *Today* I identify as a black woman. *Today* I do. It was a whole process to get here. So *today* I am comfortable telling this story [points to African book on wall] and really understanding and teaching its meanings, its links to us through heritage—because I want to and I have given it thought, not just because it was given to me to teach” (5/20/09).

She does not feel she would be able to present the theme of African Stories with the same passion and dedication without having gone through the process of reassessing her own sense of self. The work she has done along with the other educators towards understanding and accepting her cultural and racial heritage has also had wide-reaching effects on her family. She explains that before she did not identify as a black woman because her mother told her that her family was not black—implying that they did not want to be associated with this “negative” societal identification. However, as they watched Ednai go through the process of claiming her black identity and coming out with a sense of empowerment, their preconceptions altered—their respect for her changed into respect for her as a black woman—and they acknowledged her claimed identity.

When I asked Ednai what her life would be like if ECLM had never played a part in it, she said, without hesitating, “*totally different*” (5/20/09). She had been a student at the school, had maintained close mentee/mentor relationships with teachers throughout her youth, returned

as an Arte-Educador, and been a teacher there ever since her late teens. She said that she had already given this possibility serious thought and decided that she would be, without a doubt, a housewife like her sisters. She described how her sisters had not gone to ECLM and in high school were occupied with friendships and other adolescent interests, leaving them feeling “useless” and “frustrated” now that they were adults. “My entire life has been changed because of Luiza Mahin.”²⁹

Hearing the amazing histories of women such as Luciene, Marilene, and Ednai, it struck me that, more so than how teachers’ lives affect them inside the school walls, it is how their experiences at the school affects their lives outside its walls that provides true inspiration. If this system of liberatory education affects both those acted upon *and* those *doing* the acting, it seems remarkably successful in its mission to effect change, growth, and knowledge on its community.

Democratic Classrooms: Dissolving Strict Roles in Student-Teacher Interactions in Order to Promote a Liberatory Classroom Experience

In affirming that they are working with lives and not objects, the educators return the agency and humanity to their students³⁰, creating a democratic classroom. Bell Hooks in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* explains that in order “to bring a spirit of study to learning that takes place both in and beyond the classroom settings, learning must be understood as an experience that enriches life in its entirety.” One in-classroom manifestation of this, or praxis, is an approach of dialogue. Dialogue is the method most commonly used outside of the classroom for interpersonal exchanges of knowledge, and is therefore very familiar to the students in that context. What they may not realize is that dialoguing requires a process of

²⁹ (5/20/09).

³⁰ Previously put forth by Freire as “to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 85).

intrapersonal, intersubjective critical consciousness reinforced by a sharing of ideas sparked from different unique interpretations. Through collective interaction with the material, the student body is able to better perceive the mental context of their thoughts (internal) in conjunction with the human context of their opinion (relational)—raising their conscientização in a complex way. This process must necessarily incorporate reflections of empathy and intersubjectivity or else it will only further isolate the experience of the individual.³¹

Working with children and story-telling, there are many opportunities to be taken advantage of to encourage discourses of intersubjectivity. In fact, not acknowledging its influence would be blatantly ignoring the interpretation each child has. Studying “Contos Africanos,” I shared in activities where children re-told their internalization of the African folktale, acted as narrator of a story, or created a story themselves to which the other students listened and responded. There were also acting interpretations and artistic expression in order to facilitate the young children to demonstrate the understanding they had of the stories.

The idea that knowledge is not “owned” by the teacher but instead created through dialectical moments,³² condemns authoritarian, lecture-style approaches in favor of intersubjective dialogue with guiding questions. Teachers of this method realize that the thought behind a student’s answer is more important than whether it is “right”—because with patience and direction they will soon come to the correct introspection and self-correct (*Proposta* p. 17). With this understanding the teacher becomes more tolerant of childlike errors, and remains calm and explanatory rather than harsh and derogatory.³³

³¹ Phillips, Louise. "Provoking Critical Awareness and Intersubjectivity through 'Transformative Storytelling.'"

³² Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

³³ Marilene explained that this detail is very important and unique here compared with her experiences at other schools where they tended towards expressions like “Shut up!” which degrade the children.

The importance of this demeanor is the community of affection, safety, and familiarity it creates in which the child can flourish. One's manner of speaking affects the listener's reception of the message³⁴. Teachers at ECLM are affectionate with their students, seemingly unaware or unaffected by the notions of affection as “biased,” “contaminating,” or “inappropriate” that seem to plague most conventional educational systems. In fact, this affection helps create the sense of wellbeing children are able to experience within the walls—which, unlike the harsh urban space expanding outside of them, is full of caring, attentive adults who know them personally.

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, “safety” is a need that must be met before processes of “self-actualization.” Self-actualization is the highest level of being which includes acts of “problem-solving,” “creativity,” “acceptance of information”³⁵—or what I would call liberatory learning experiences. Although I am not using Maslow's theories as my base framework, it is interesting to consider his proposition that without proper conditions of physical satiation, safety, and even love, affection, and self-esteem (all concepts avidly supported by ECLM's model yet often neglected in current school systems), a being is not usually able to transcend to development of higher functions.

To facilitate these multi-faceted needs, teachers and coordinators alike seem to naturally step out of the proscribed technical definitions of their roles: feeding kids, tying shoes, braiding hair, playing ball, washing hands, and acting as nurse when needed. At ECLM, the classroom is a safe space where *people* can interact; it creates “an atmosphere in the classroom where teaching, learning, and studying are serious acts but also ones that generate happiness”³⁶ for all.

³⁴ Planning Day meeting, 5/9/09, see ISP Field Journal

³⁵ From previous knowledge of Maslow's Hierarchy, augmented with a chart from <http://www.deepermind.com/20maslow.htm>

³⁶ Paulo Freire, as cited in Bell Hooks, *Teaching Community*, p. 44

Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin’s Effect on the Community and Alums

In addition to the teachers’ stories of professional and personal transformation at ECLM, I witnessed the shockwave of influence that the school has had on the lives of various members of the community. Because of its close affiliation with the Associação dos Moradores and therefore the REPROTAI youth group and Palmares School of Information Technology (all based out of the physical school building), the tendrils of social change from this space emanated out in many directions. The space itself serves all of the aforementioned purposes in addition to housing a library room that is free to any youth or adult from the community³⁷. This library includes a large children’s section as well as adult fiction, non-fiction, reference, and socio-political volumes—mostly donated or collected from second-hand sources. Again, the care and conscientiousness put into creating and maintaining this library is shared with the all-inclusive generosity characterized in ECLM’s mission statement.

ECLM’s “Arte-Educador” program is another original way the school engages local youth, in collaboration with the REPROTAI network youth group. Young people must submit to and be selected from an application process in which they must demonstrate critical thinking about the transformative role of education and a desire to be involved in this process. Their roles in the school are those of volunteers, helpers, and assistant teachers. They are helpful to the school’s functionality and are simultaneously learning important skills of teamwork, organization, and responsibility for their own lives. They participate in pedagogical trainings and get hands-on training as a teacher, which “plant the seed” in them—potentially evolving the next generation of liberatory educators. One more benefit of the program is the positive role models the Arte-Educadors embody for younger children, especially the ECLM students. Working

³⁷ Luciene explained that, especially in the past, the library used to be a very important service to the community—who have been provided with no easily-accessible, nearby library from the city. However, now with the rise of internet use, it is less utilized by local students for research, etc.

closely together, the students come to know and respect the Arte-Educadores, whom they can relate to in social spheres as well.

The cycle of liberatory education that ECLM hopes to establish in this community is already underway. Many of the current Arte-Educadores were students at Luiza Mahin³⁸, as were some teachers, staff members, and volunteers. Luciene confirmed that many people return to offer service, become involved in the other branches of the community association, or send their children to continue the ECLM experience. The school, although not very large in size, has created quite a renowned reputation in the community—in fact, even in the entire city, country, and world! It has been cited in works such as UNESCO’s comprehensive study/ book *Relações Raciais na Escola: reprodução de desigualdades em nome do igualdade*.³⁹

Still, the biggest effect, I believe, is the one that will be carried on within its students as they move through their lives. Marilene said about her 11-year-old daughter, currently studying at a local private school, “she still has the shrewdness that she developed here. She still has her knowledge from here, very much so... No matter what, she continues saying, ‘No Mom, I will succeed. I am going to do it’” (Marilene 5/22/09). Sixteen-year-old Jessica, an ECLM alum and current Arte-Educador, explains that ECLM has been “the school that has helped me most.”⁴⁰ She is currently a high school student, active member of the Rede REPROTAI group, dancer in the Dance-Arte group, and Arte-Educador in ECLM. While it may seem this schedule would be hard to juggle, Jessica confidently explains that all of these experiences combine and work together with “the objectives that I formed here...so this has really helped me on my life path.” That path she envisions for herself includes becoming a pediatric doctor at the Health Post, she shared as she adeptly explained the problems she perceives with the neighborhood’s current

³⁸ Jessica (5/22/09)

³⁹ In bibliography for reference

⁴⁰ Jessica (5/22/09)

medical situation. As she spoke about studying sciences in school and her career path, she affirmed that she was choosing this because it was what she wanted to do and what she felt was important for the future well-being of her community.

Room for Improvement

I went into this research assignment hopeful but also a bit skeptical about the feasibility of putting liberatory educational theories into *practice*. Needless to say, I was impressed by the work being done at Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin and the amount of dedicated *conscientização* the educators put into their educating methods. Still, despite the largely positive impression I received from my time at the school, I think it is important to acknowledge that no institution is perfect.

There were times during my participatory/observatory research that I had doubts as to the effectiveness of the seemingly-unruly or struggling classroom situation. Sometimes students did not do their work for entire activities because they were distracted or unattended; other times the instructions seemed unclear or inconsistent to the point that not only the students but myself as well did not understand what the desired task was to be. In one lesson on numbers the teacher wanted students to pick up number cards from the floor that would “make ten.” At first it seemed that she wanted numbers that added up to ten, but when a child picked up a “one” and a “zero” card, she validated him as well, showing the class how one and zero “make ten” with the cards. This moment was interesting for me because it illustrated the various, subjective ways each student interprets concepts—ways that are sometimes equally logical, but different than the teacher’s intention. But still, even though the teacher’s validation of his interpretation was interesting, pedagogically speaking, in the classroom setting it was visibly confusing to the other

students who were only just mastering the concept of addition. Because this alternative way of thinking is also a common and damaging mistake, I felt the teacher should have made a better distinction, but instead concluded the lesson as it was. Surely every teacher will encounter an “off” day, as will the students, but it seemed that some of my observed instances of classroom chaos had spiraled out of the teacher’s control. Interestingly, these doubts led me to consider some possible implications about the previously established ideologies that *I* had brought with me to the field about classroom conduct and might have been imposing onto my observations (which I will discuss further in my conclusion).

Also, despite the patient compassion I witnessed on many accounts, there were other instances where a teacher did not manage to avoid shortness of temper or sending a child to the coordination office without an explanation. Also, there were a few activities that were quite non-engaging, such as copying down the numbers from 1 to 100, meant for practice.

Also, apparently a stereotype exists in the other local schools that ECLM students are “noisy” or “disorderly.” Luciene explained that these schools see this as negative, as if the students had serious behavior issues, but it is actually a reflection of their penchant for dialogue and opinion-forming critical thinking—practices not encouraged in an authoritarian classroom.⁴¹ I agree with her wish that ECLM could carry on the education of its students throughout *educação fundamental* so that they would not have to be disenfranchised in the traditional institutions. Bell Hooks also mentioned the common ridicule faced by these educators as “not as rigorous or as without standards. This is especially the case when the democratic educator attempts to create a spirit of joyful practice within the classroom” (Hooks, p. 44).

In fact one of the biggest faults I find with the school stems from my positive impression of it. That is: it only serves a small portion of the population. This is not really a criticism of the

⁴¹ (Luciene, *ISP Field Journal*)

school itself, because it is not really within its direct control, but instead a frustration that more communities of marginalized people can't find the same success and liberation achieved by Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin. As Paulo Freire contended, a population's liberation has to come from within the oppressed people's own volition and action;⁴² therefore each community school must be a product of each community. This means ECLM does and is only able to serve its locality⁴³, and, in its current financial situation, only up until "primeira séria."⁴⁴

Unfortunately, the success here is not a solution to the mainstream problem of current education systems. It offers an alternative that serves its community well, and can serve as a model to other oppressed communities struggling for agency and action. However, this model is probably not feasible for the entire mainstream, mainly because of the dilemma of lack of public funding. This unfortunate consideration is one that leads to many problems at ECLM, despite its current partnership with World Vision, including qualified teachers leaving for better pay at publicly-funded schools,⁴⁵ a constant struggle to provide sufficient wages and to find constant supply and snack funding. Devastatingly, even this funding partnership is not sure—it is set to expire in 2012. Luciene explained the time-bomb nature of this situation, waiting to derail the progress this school has achieved, because they have no means of continuing without it.⁴⁶ She said that they could close or have the government appropriate the space into a municipal school—hiring all new teachers and wiping out all of the pedagogical structures they have in place. Despite all of this, Luciene still holds out hope for the future, and vows that she will

⁴² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

⁴³ It is free and open to the public, but because of limited positions in classrooms, it operates on a first-come-first-serve basis. Whoever comes to reserve their child's place before the school reaches capacity is admitted.

⁴⁴ Originally the school served until "Quarta Séria," but because of the higher cost of supporting older classrooms and teacher salaries, they down-sized two years ago to their current offering.

⁴⁵ Luciene lamented that "almost every teacher, once completing their courses at the public university, leaves for a higher-paying job." Often she says they do not want to leave, but are compelled by the necessity of supporting their family (a common responsibility of matriarchs in Uruguai).

⁴⁶ Past attempts to petition the municipal government for funding has been largely unsuccessful or ridden with paralyzing bureaucracy (a grant they received in 2007 has yet to be deposited, Luciene said [*ISP Field Journal*]).

continue fighting. Paulo Freire echoes her spirit with “hope, however, does not consist in crossing one’s arms and waiting. As long as I fight, I am moved by hope, and if I fight with hope, then I can wait.”⁴⁷ Looking at the strength she has embodied in her life in and outside of ECLM, I am amazed that she can still be hopeful in the face of such a looming fate.

Conclusions

In this study, I hoped to address possible approaches towards an education process that liberates and inspires its students, educators, and community members—recognizing them as complete, conscious, and dynamic human beings—by studying the specific successful practices at Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin. I was impressed by the amount of work, both in action and in development of their own conscientização, that they put in to their roles as educators—marrying the theories they claim to embody with the praxis they enact in the classroom. It would be my personal dream to see all teachers utilize this level of preparation, conscientiousness, differentiated activities, and inputted time in their teaching. Often alternatives are only offered to the most privileged sector of society—those provided with the luxury of options—so another victory is knowing that this work is mainly benefiting a small population of Afro-Brazilian, low-income, pre-primary-aged children (one of the most systematically neglected and de-prioritized populations in the world).

There is an abundance of further research that could be done, with more time and resources, about community school movements, liberatory and integrated education techniques, importance of educação infantil in a student’s school career, and affect of personal-identity forming in both teacher and student success. The huge effect that race and racial identity have on the realities and outcomes of members of communities such as Uruguai, Salvador should be

⁴⁷ *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 92

noted; and further introspection into the roles of women in the space of community organizing and education would also be valuable.

The experiences of most students within conventional schools are severely fragmented, with a chasm of denial forced between the in and out of classroom realities each student faces. If students attend schools for the practice of learning, then they should be learning for life. This requires constant, vigilant, and critical consideration of oneself and the world around you, continuously renewing conscientização, and an integration of the entire spectrum of knowledge regardless of the settings they may be encountered. This learning, this practice of freedom, will create a positive cycle of cognitive liberation. In the end, the educational systems in place are still riddled with oppressive structures, but witnessing a largely successful attempt at liberatory education—Escola Comunitária Luiza Mahin, founded and sustained in a fight against both the system and the odds—restores hope that a transformative educational model has the potential to transform a community.

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SIT's ISP Appendix

1. *How much of the final monograph is primary data? Why did you choose to include this data?*

I included some previously established concepts from Friere, Hooks, and intersubjectivity studies in order to create the base of theoretical work that has already occurred on this topic and that influenced my own conclusions. Other than this, the majority of this paper is a mixture of the theories derived directly from ECLM's Political and Pedagogical Proposal, semi-structured and informal conversations with educators, and classroom observations. I felt the specific descriptions were important to include because they ground the paper's mostly positive conclusions in concrete, observed realities.

2. *Did your original topic change and evolve as you discovered or did not discover new and different resources? Did the resources available modify or determine the topic?*

Yes. Three realizations greatly affected a shift in my research: 1. that the children were at a very young age and would not make easily analyzed or particularly reliable sources, 2. that

I could not remain a passive observer in the classroom, and 3. that the role of teachers, and the personal development they go through in order to live up to their ideologies, was so crucial and impressive to the success of this process; I felt the need to include their transformative experiences as well.

3. How did your experiences change your own personal thinking about the topic?

It made me reevaluate my subconscious devaluation of pre-primary education. It made me deconstruct the ways I was taught in a classroom. It made me deconstruct anew the privileges I was obviously afforded in my childhood and school experiences. It made me revalue warmth and community in the separate “learning box” that I subconsciously considered school, despite my ideologies. It made me hopeful about the possibilities for schools to at least come closer to liberatory education, despite the depressingly systematic oppressive institutions in place. Hope.

4. If you met a future student who wanted to do this same project, what would be your recommendations to her/him?

Don't be afraid to participate. Don't be afraid to put yourself out there and fall flat on your face and feel out of your comfort zone, because you are entering a tight-knit community, but they are inclined to accept you if you are open. Keep your eyes open for the tiny examples that illustrate the greater workings at place. Oh, and also, keep an organized, daily typed-up field journal in addition to your “rough” in-field copy. Trust me!