

Young people's power of action in a peripheral community: confrontations and challenges

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Abstract *This article, based on doctoral research, aims to understand and draw attention to forms of social participation by young people living in a peripheral community on the coast of São Paulo State. It also examines the manners of health production encountered by the subjects themselves, to reveal how young people have approached this in a context of marked inequality. The young study participants were involved in the activities of an NGO and a hip hop group, where the researcher was placed. The results were constructed on the basis of observations recorded in field diaries and semi-structured interviews, and analysed using the Depth Hermeneutics methodology. They indicate that building community ties expresses the participation of young people and contributes to tackling inequalities and social exclusion. Participation in groups has proven potent and able to shape processes of autonomy, self-care and care for others. However, they appear as isolated initiatives by other institutions. It is also challenging to think of ways of understanding young people's participation, participating together with them in their lives in their contexts, making for horizontal relationships and surmounting the ideas of homogenisation, control and tutelage of this population.*

Key words *Social participation, Youth, Participatory research, Community, Health*

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Introduction

Social participation is an important pillar of democracy as regards constantly building it into a just society. Participation is indispensable as a channel for establishing, for example, our national health system, the *Sistema Único de Saúde*, through participatory bodies such as the health policy councils. The term has several meanings, however, and thus should be understood in terms of its multiple facets. Participation has to do with social relations and is constructed on the basis of subjective and objective factors, constituting a point of departure for individuals to intervene in concrete, historical situations¹.

Studies surveyed by Boghossian & Minayo² show that young people have encountered new ways and opportunities for organising, mobilising and engaging in a variety of social contexts, of which the political, leisure and artistic spheres are a few examples. However, a large contingent of young people belong to social strata that suffer exclusion and inequality. For that reason, as Boghossian & Minayo point out, in the case of social participation by young people, there is still room for progress.

Youth participation is regarded as necessary, because there is a set of ideas that ideologically exalts young people as subjects who have the potential to transform society³. These subjects, however, are always considered in terms of relations of control and tutelage, because according to a number of ideas current in society, youth represents threats, risks and vulnerabilities⁴. In short: [...] youth policies are not merely the passive portrait of dominant manners of conceiving the youth condition, but can operate actively in producing new representations⁵.

Adolescents and youth have many rights guaranteed in law. However, the very lack of consensus on concepts such as adolescence and youth results in imprecision in specifying public policies for these individuals. Rather than *youth*, many authors have preferred the term *youths* (in the plural), with a view to bringing out the peculiarities of this age group⁶, in an endeavour to surmount the recurrent homogenisations of Brazilian youth contained in laws and government programmes⁴.

This article emphasises that, over and above legal recognition for rights, there is a need to think about young people as persons capable of intervening in, and exercising control over, their own lives⁷ and constituting other forms of social participation, sometimes similar to established

forms of participation, but sometimes differing from traditional means.

Souza⁸ notes that problems relating to social inequality go beyond purely economic issues. There is structural – and thus historical – inequality in Brazil. These inequalities have been naturalised and circumscribed in intersubjective relations in spaces of everyday interaction and they influence the processes in which participation is constructed.

This article aims to highlight modes of social participation, understood as *power of action*, the capacity to affect and be affected, which is not dissociated from either subjectivity or the context in which participation is produced and shaped⁹. Also, in an endeavour to reveal how young people in a context of vulnerability have tackled their difficulties, it seeks to understand how participation in the groups where the researcher was placed had prompted manners of thinking about health production that were encountered by the subjects themselves.

Methods

Since 2012, the UNIFESP has conducted research and extension activities in the community of Vila dos Pescadores (VP). The Primary Health Care Centre has constituted the main partner and base for the projects pursued in the neighbourhood and its community health workers were the professionals who enabled professors and (introduction to scientific method, masters and doctoral) students to engage in the field, thus also assuring successful reconnaissance of the territory.

A large number of these studies have been framed as Participatory Research¹⁰⁻¹², with especial emphasis on the researcher's ethical posture and ethical and political commitment to the realities studied. For ethical development to occur during the fieldwork, Schmidt¹¹ suggests certain attitudes, including dialogue, alterity and care in drafting the product of knowledge before and after its conclusion, giving feedback and return to the research participants. These attitudes are also recommended by Fals Borda¹⁰, who draws attention to the importance of historicity and to breaking with the asymmetries in the relationship between subject and object, which are a classic feature of positivist science.

Accordingly, the study is inspired in participatory research in that it was necessary to enter and participate in the research activities with the young people, because the interest was in

producing knowledge *with* them and not *for* of them. This is a qualitative social science study, an approach whose scope includes the intention to understand the phenomenon and the social realities on the basis of the historicity and the relations built up between the researcher and study participants. It thus becomes possible to interpret senses and meanings as framed by specific contexts¹³. This article relates to the doctoral research No. 2015/26500-5, funded by the Sao Paulo State research funding agency (*Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo*, FAPESP).

The instrument used to construct the results was participatory observation. The aim was to record and understand the relationships established by the young people, as well as their accounts of what it is like to live in the community of VP. A field diary was produced for each field visit and observation conducted. The observations were taken in two different settings, which will be further described in the next section. The first was an NGO working with children and young people in the community, suggested in 2015 by a community health worker at the time the author was doing a master's degree; the second, a hip hop group suggested by an adolescent at the NGO. The study was conducted with adolescents and young people from 12 to 29 years of age¹⁴.

The observations were taken from of March to October 2017. In the NGO, they occurred at least twice a week in the morning and afternoon periods. The students of the hip hop group held their classes twice a week. The researcher was present at least one day a week in the evening period. The field diaries were produced on the basis of those observations. Both those diaries and the interviews endeavoured to contemplate psychosocial factors relating, for example, to how the young people perceived the community and their participation in it.

The theoretical frame of reference in a given by the historical materialist current in Socio-Historical Psychology. This term was coined by Lane¹⁵, an author who sought to develop an approach to psychology and that would break with the ahistorical subject present in the approaches used until then. It was also a break with the dichotomous notion of man and society, in which one constitutes the other^{15,16}.

Depth Hermeneutics (DH) was applied in order to expand the frame of reference for the participatory research. This methodology employees analysis on three levels, which do not overlap, but are related to one another during the pro-

cess of analysis and construction of the qualitative information. The first level is *socio-historical analysis*, that is, understanding the social context. It is related to the second level, *formal analysis*, which is concerned with understanding the analysis of senses and meanings. Lastly, comes the *interpretation/reinterpretation* phase, in which the researcher reinterprets the phenomenon studied, on the basis of theories and other concepts and considering that the phenomena have already been interpreted previously by the study participants¹⁷.

Accordingly, the next section offers the socio-historical analysis, that is, a brief account of the history of the community where the study was carried out. The socio-historical data are based particularly on the reports and observations constructed in the field work. The Results and Discussion section comprises the formal analysis and interpretation/reinterpretation phases in which the senses and meanings relating to young people's power of action in the Vila dos Pescadores (VP) are analysed on the basis of the interviews and field diaries.

The Vila dos Pescadores community

Cubatão, one of nine municipalities that make up what is known as the Baixada Santista Metropolitan Region, had a population of 117,210 in 2010¹⁸. The same year, 31% of the town's inhabitants lived in conditions of very high vulnerability. That index was an attempt to understand the economic and social performance of the municipalities of São Paulo State, taking into consideration the issue of inequality.

Cubatão is one of the largest industrial hubs in Latin America and industry is the chief source of its economy. The history of VP is bound up with the industrialisation process, which intensified in the 1960s, attracting large numbers of migrant workers, particularly from northeast Brazil. Many of these migrants worked on the building underway in the town and lived in accommodation maintained by the construction firms. When the work ended, lacking the means to return home, they settled in peripheral areas of the town¹⁹.

Vila dos Pescadores got its name from the area of mangrove where it grew up and where, to this day, artisanal fishermen catch swimming crab, crab, shrimps and fish. A large part of the neighbourhood is built on piles with narrow wooden walkways running between the houses over the mangrove. According to the neighbour-

hood primary health care centre, approximately 30,000 people were estimated to live there in 2017. There are no specific official figures on the community.

The closer to the riverbank, the more stilt houses; there is no sanitation, the electricity is illegal and refuse is dumped straight into the mangrove. The sewers are open ditches. All the houses are built close together and the neighbourhood has only one entrance and exit²⁰.

Children and young people use their creativity in order to enjoy any leisure in the neighbourhood. They play football in dilapidated squares, nearly always occupied by drug users and where part of the population deposits its refuse. The neighbourhood has refuse collection, but when the skips are full, people dump their waste in public places (squares, streets and alleyways). It is common for children and youngsters to swim in the polluted river, practicing diving from the bridge of the railway line that runs through the neighbourhood. Diseases are thus common in this age group.

There is a day-care centre in the neighbourhood, but places are very limited, obliging parents and guardians to enrol their children at centres in other neighbourhoods. That situation means that many young people, particularly girls, have to take care of younger siblings (accompanying them to and from school, seeing to their meals and hygiene) while their parents are out, generally working in poorly paid services: *Taking on responsibilities at home is quite natural to them: caring for younger siblings, fetching them from school, doing or helping with housework. These are generally commonplace activities in these youngsters' lives* (Field Diary, 06 June 2017). There are no primary or secondary schools and young people have to travel approximately 3km every day to the neighbouring district, Jardim Casqueiro, an upper middle-class neighbourhood.

In addition to the day-care centre, the public facilities consist in a primary health care centre built in the 1980s and first called the Medical and Dental Health Care Post (*Posto de Atendimento Médico e Odontológico de Saúde, PAMOS*). To this day, people refer to it as the PAMOS or *postinho* ("little post"), although it has been operating as part of Brazil's Family Health Strategy for approximately 10 years.

Since 2012, when the UNIFESP started doing introduction to scientific method, masters and doctoral research and extension work at the health care centre, young people have been observed to be absent from that institution. It was

common to hear health personnel say that young people did not attend the service, reflecting the institution's remoteness from this population group. That fact prompted an interest in doing research with this group. It was also common to hear health personnel mention young people's involvement with drug trafficking²⁰.

The same kind of report was also commonly heard from personnel of the NGO, the masters and doctoral study site. The NGO serves some 20 children and young people from the neighbourhood. It has operated in the community since 1980 on the initiative of a woman resident, who today works as the institution's supervisor. On perceiving the situation of the children living on the streets, with no leisure or care options, she began to give supplementary classes and workshops with storytellers.

In the 1990s the NGO professionalised and today has an administrator, an administrative supervisor, a psychologist, a social assistant and eight monitors, in addition to volunteers who help the institution with donations of food, toys and clothing. Young people spend half the day at the NGO, in separate morning and afternoon shifts. They take part in craft workshops, psychosocial support sessions (with the psychologist) and computer classes. It receives funding through the Social Assistance Department and a large logistics firm. It serves children from 7 to 11 years old and adolescents from 12 to 17 years old.

The other space where observations were made was the Community Centre, where young people had a hip hop group in which they held dance, poetry and beat box classes in the evenings. The classes are given by two young hip hop culture enthusiasts from the community, working as volunteers. The meetings are held twice a week and last three hours. The age range is from 12 to 29 years. The researcher entered that setting on the invitation of a young person of the NGO. Four young people from the hip hop group were interviewed.

Results and discussion

After briefly describing the community context where the young people live, this section aims to bring out the content recorded in the field diaries produced from observations and interactions with individuals at the NGO and the hip hop group. The first concern was to ascertain how the young people felt living in Vila dos Pescadores, how they interpreted their lives in a context of

marked social inequality, in the belief that that, in that way, the dialectic relations existing between certain objective and subjective factors could be understood^{15,17}. Because of the bonds developed through the NGO and the hip hop group, the young people have been able to build other frames of reference for their lives.

You don't see any regard for VP either. There seems to be no connection and identification with the place where they live. There seems to be a disjoint. The hip hop does not seem to be associated with the place, but rather is a way of constructing and maintaining bonds and intersubjective relations. What seems to give them support is the relations they establish among themselves in the group. [...] The strong friendship bonds they forge may be what led one of the boys to say "we're a family" (Field Diary, 09 August 2017).

Where the group meets is less important to the young people than the relations established among themselves. The feeling of belonging to the place arises from the affective bonds forged there²¹. The split between place of belonging and the young people is also perceived in the context of the NGO, which has two centres. The first, in Vila dos Pescadores, attends to children from 7 to 11 years old. The second is in Jardim Casqueiro, an upper middle-class neighbourhood adjoining the community. The intention of the NGO project was to show the young people other possibilities and realities, so as to wean them away from the threats of drug trafficking and prostitution, for example.

These are projects in which there is some level of participation. There is always the discourse of *saving the young people from the perils of the street and the world* and often the idea of the young people saving each other. In the words of Sawaia²², it is permitted to react, not to act.

The responsibility for modifying the realities is considered to lie with other, unknown organisations. The dichotomies between individual and society are even mentioned when what is involved is health. In the subject's speech, however, there is a perception of a whole. In the case of health care, though, that whole has been rendered precarious, causing individuals to turn their actions and care towards themselves.

You know that things in Brazil are not that good? So like, man, we live in a place where you have to, have to have your head on straight, understand? There's nowhere to run to. [...] There's no hospital in Cubatão. [...] So, we have to treat ourselves, man. I say treat, like, if you stay, you try to get yours, only yours, without worrying about

other people, I mean the others, like, here's an example: there's no reason for me to be on the street at two o'clock in the morning, understand? [...] God forbid a patrol car shows up, understand, then there's a fight, then you take a stray bullet. Or, for instance, I'm at a funk dance, in a careless moment I end up having relations with someone I don't where they're from, I can get the HIV virus, understand? Then, like, you have to keep your head on even then. You have to make the right choices, understand? [...] So we have to do our part too, our role to be played, understand? (Interview of A, 22 years old, hip hop teacher).

The young person is thinking about the neglect felt in healthcare. Cubatão was going through a financial crisis, which forced it to close down activities at the public hospital. From August to October 2017, the Primary Health Centre's care capacity was reduced with termination of the contract with the Social Organisation that managed human resources and contracted certain specialities, such as doctors, nurses, endemic disease surveillance agents, nursing auxiliaries and managers. That situation reflects the weakening of public health services.

Although, when the youngster mentions the hospital in association with the idea of health, he is talking about a certain biological conception, he also expresses the idea of how the people of VP live in an immediatist (presentist) survival context. This presentism causes the popular classes, on the basis of past experience of suffering and illness, to mobilise their vital energies towards *providing* (now) rather than *providing for* (future)⁷.

Some experiences reported by the young people appear related to the power of suffering^{20,22}, in which there was a preponderance of sad affects and passions that constrain the power of individual action, with the interviewees' often considering themselves the ones most responsible for their suffering. Note that, despite this, these are projects that have the potential – whether through rap the NGO – to produce critical thinking about social inequality. These are ways they have found to build autonomy and control over their own lives. The projects that they manage, one way or another, to construct constitute spaces that enable them to participate, to share experiences and feelings – something that the healthcare centre has not managed to cater to yet.

[...] a lot of the kids there, my beat box pupils, before they were there, understand, they were often on the street, I've even seen pupils of mine, before being my pupils, on the street, like 11 at night,

that's kids 13, 12 years old, understand? And afterwards, they weren't (Interview of A, 22 years old, hip hop teacher).

[...] dancing is something I love, when I don't dance for a while, like, it's as if I was living somewhere where, I don't know, I can't manage to find myself anywhere, it's as if I was going in a straight line without knowing where I want to get to (Interview of W, 18 years old, hip hop pupil).

These processes of forging bonds of friendship raise the notion of social support⁷. Social support involves reciprocity and positive behaviour between individuals or groups who assist one another materially and emotionally, permitting greater autonomy and control over their lives. As described by Valla⁷: “[...] social support contributes to maintaining people's health, because it plays a mediating function”.

Amidst the adversities and attenuation of inequalities in contexts that are increasingly competitive, vulnerable and violent, the young people seem to point to the construction of another possible world, reinstating the dimension of solidarity. They suggest the notion of “good encounters”, encounters that increase the ability to act on the strength of positive affects, which mobilise individuals to continue striving in favour of their own and the group's existence²³.

The young boy (13 years old) said he didn't enjoy living. That shocked the other youngsters. They asked indignantly how someone could not like living. And smiling he said that the only thing that made him want to live were his friends, citing their names (they all belonged to the hip hop group). The boy talked about a kind of social participation involving affective bonds and the notion of friendship, good encounters (Field Diary, 06 June 2017).

Good encounters are able to empower subjects in their community and collective experiences. Work by social projects seems to place the emphasis not on what the young people supposedly lack, which would require a moral hierarchy, but rather on what Strappazon & Maheirie²⁴ describe as “[...] their potency, framed by the encounter as a composition dependent on all those who are involved there”.

However, the construction of references through groups, specifically the hip hop group, is permeated by the aspirations of adults, nearly always represented by relatives and also the NGO personnel, who still see the young people as embodying risk and threat and, accordingly, needing control and tutelage. These are ideas that ultimately reinforce asymmetrical relations¹⁷ and are reflected, for example, in the instability of

some young people's participation in the hip hop group, because their parents or guardians believe “there's no future” in their involvement in that kind of culture.

People here are very narrow-minded, you know? They don't see it as anything that good. [...] Closed minds is like, thinking, like: ah, there's no future in that, that's not so good (Interview of N, 19 years old, hip hop teacher).

They come under pressure to leave the group, and are often forbidden from participating. That gives rise to a process of trying to prove to parents and guardians and people of the community that participation in the group is a good thing that brings change. Parents' and guardians' mistrust may possibly also have to do with the fact that the group is administered completely by young people. This is present in their interviews: *[...] the group is still very new, the people are still very young, so we don't have much opportunity* (Interview of C, 18 years old, hip hop pupil).

Although the potentials have been highlighted here, these coexist contradictorily with certain emblematic situations. Children and young people are always subjected to the Other, to the discretion of adults⁶. Participation in the groups mentioned here introduces other possibilities, but these continue to coexist with those contradictions. Laws assure rights and protect children and young people. In Vila dos Pescadores, children and young people are subject to the discretion of adults whose rights are also often violated. The scenario is one of a lack of protection and of bonds that demand constant striving so as not to become even more fragile.

To consider young people as subjects of rights is to place them on an equal footing with all other citizens. However, running through the idea of protection is the implicit idea that these individuals are incomplete, that is, they are not fully prepared to exercise their citizenship. While, on the one hand, protection imposes responsibilities on State, family and society, on the other hand, it restricts rights and obliterates children's and young people's ability to act for themselves. They are always maintained in a situation of tutelage and control.

Moreover, this idea of incompleteness seems to be accentuated in Vila dos Pescadores. Castro⁶ argues that this idea is associated with intellectual, physical and emotional development. The young people in the community are constantly required to find avenues to overcoming their own situation of incompleteness as quickly as possible. From early on, they need to enter the labour

market in order to help their families and cannot waste time with activities like hip hop. Even the NGO faces this situation, when parents withdraw children so that they have time free to work.

By overcoming their situation of incompleteness, they overcome the situation of being disposable. The concerns that permeate discourse about children and young people have always existed, particularly in relation to rights. As children and young people represented a social threat and were not seen in terms of the continuance of society, they were disposable⁶.

Youth policies seem very interested in controlling as much of these subjects' free time as possible, so as to socialise them on the productivist logic of capitalism. Idleness is dangerous⁴. However, at Vila dos Pescadores, free time is what the boys and girls have most of, because their families do not have the means to keep that time occupied. They spend their time with online gaming, playing on the street, football, dancing, funk dances, even the hip hop group and the NGO – but not all of them take part in the activities of the NGO and the existing groups. Some eventually become involved in the world of crime, which reinforces the idea in the community that young people's free time needs to be domesticated.

Many believe that “young people must be taken off the streets”. That expression conveys the idea that young people need to be occupied in what are regarded as productive activities. Ultimately the activities are thought up by adults, in the case of the NGO, which often leads to a lack of interest on the part of the young people, who turn up at the NGO particularly or solely because their parents make them or because the like spending their free time at the institution to do what they cannot do at home: watch TV, listen to music, use the computer and play table tennis.

There seems to be an interest in colonising the young people's free time, but no-one ever asks them if and how they want to do it. That colonisation is nearly always effected through uninteresting activities unconnected with the realities of their lives. Opting to “do nothing” is an affront to the community and, in the view of adults and even some youngsters, a sign of laziness and the failing that later may (threatens to) culminate in involvement with crime and early pregnancy.

Although laws such as the Statute of the Child and Adolescent may guarantee rights in a universal fashion, in practice, they ultimately select the most vulnerable in isolated actions by sector⁶. That finding was made in a masters research project, which observed little dialogue and coor-

dination among schools, NGOs, health services and *capoeira* groups, all institutions responsible for serving young people²⁰.

Rights must to have legal recognition, because we live in a democracy resting on the principles of liberty and equality. However, there are dimensions not reached by the mere guarantee of rights. There is talk of a right to health, for example, a right to free movement, a right to housing. All are human achievements, but as couched in the letter of the law, can give the impression that enough progress has been made and the struggle is over. These young people want to be recognised for much more than their rights as guaranteed in law. They want to be acknowledged as people, people with a subjectivity shaped by a context of marked social inequality.

Souza⁸, revisiting the work of Charles Taylor on dignity and recognition, argues that the latter has to do with [...] *the relation between sharing an emotional and moral economy contingent on the possibility of social recognition for individuals and groups: for the equality rule to be legally efficacious, the perception of equality in the dimension of everyday life has to be effectively internalised*. In other words, recognition of the Other as a person precedes legal recognition of his or her rights.

In their daily lives, the people of Vila dos Pescadores coexist with the violation of numerous rights. For youth, that situation is aggravated by the ideas of control, tutelage and disposability. Souza⁸ offers important elements for thinking about the historical construction of social inequality in Brazil. The community's young people bear the perverse marks of that inequality and are regarded as lesser people by society as a whole. Unpleasant situations of being stopped by the police are quite a common experience for these individuals, of whom people always expect the worst.

The young hip hop teacher told us of one very moving episode when the beat box won him recognition. Years ago, he was practising beat with his friend in a square in the community. It was late in the afternoon when the police began an operation of some kind in the Vila and he and his friend decided to go home. Slightly embarrassed by the presence of the police, they continued to play the beat box more quietly as they walked home. Nonetheless, a policeman they passed managed to hear it and approached them. At that moment, he and his friend were apprehensive. However, the policeman praised them and they were very relieved and satisfied at having been recognised for their culture (Field Diary, 09 August 2017).

The association between youth and violence is ideological and historical, as pointed out by Trassi & Malvasi²⁵. Aware of that fact, the youngsters were apprehensive when the policeman approached them, which is always done abusively and causes discomfort. The community, particularly the young people, live with the violence perpetrated by the State and the coercive power of the drug traffickers, which constitutes an extreme expression of capitalism and neoliberalism²⁶ and occupies gaps left by the State.

The NGO and the hip hop group aim to work to prevent the young people's getting involved with drug trafficking: [...] *we are here to combat the negative side. They come on heavy, we come on heavier, that's the art* (Interview of A, 22 years old, hip hop teacher). Young people's involvement with drug trafficking can lead to a feeling of impotence, of paralysis. However, the youngsters develop strategies to counter the phenomenon.

The NGO monitor's reply was an emphatic: "He's selling". I was paralysed. I was really upset. When it was time to go, alone in the car, I cried. Just as I do with the youngsters today, at the time of the masters research, I played a lot of ping-pong with that boy, who is now 17 years old. The radio, the little backpack and his lowering his head in shame at seeing the people of the NGO, all indicate that he really is trafficking. I kept asking myself what had happened to that boy's dreams of becoming a footballer and of going to live in a better neighbourhood or city (Field Diary, 23 June 2017).

Contradictions constitute social processes. Learning and understanding contradictions is a

manner of breaking with the mere reproduction of ideas and behaviour that are considered natural^{15,17}. The NGO and the hip hop group act in the midst of contradictions, making it possible to apprehend and comprehend certain things, because they themselves are, to some extent, a contradiction in an increasingly individualised world where social relations are constructed to the detriment of the group. In the groups, as shown above, there is the notion of friendship and opportunities for the youngsters to construct other references for their lives, building on the encounter with other young people whose lives pose similar realities.

Final remarks

The findings show the potency of the forms of social participation created by the young people in community spaces afforded by the NGO and the hip hop group and directed primarily to contending with the consequences of inequality. This article has indicated the importance of studies of young people that take account of their modes of sociability, subjectivity and social participation, with a view to giving visibility to these issues and seeking manners of constructing knowledge jointly in formal spaces, but also in the informal spaces often created by the young people themselves. It continues to be an important challenge not only to develop public policies with young people, but also to produce science and knowledge with them.

Collaborations

DM Anhas was responsible for the study, field work and bibliographic survey. DM Anhas and CRC Silva contributed in the writing of the article and analysis of the results.

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