



Theatrical Training Marked by Popular Education and Popular Culture: a means of emancipation for young people

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ABSTRACT – Theatrical Training Marked by Popular Education and Popular Culture: a means of emancipation for young people – The article discusses the meanings that young people from peripheral neighborhoods attribute to their theater studying experience marked by popular education and popular culture in an educational institution in Belo Horizonte. Highlighting the presence of diversity, collectivity and political agendas in their studying, young people point out social awareness as a significant impact of this process. The theatrical artistic-pedagogical experience was configured as a space for socialization, positivation of subaltern young people's identities and contributed to their emancipation processes as social subjects.

Keywords: **Theatrical Training. Popular Education. Popular Culture. Emancipation. Youth.**

RÉSUMÉ – Formation Théâtrale Marquée par L'Éducation Populaire et la Culture Populaire: un moyen d'émancipation pour les jeunes – L'article disserte sur les significations que les jeunes de la banlieue attribuent à leur expérience de formation théâtrale marquée par l'éducation populaire et la culture populaire dans une institution d'enseignement à Belo Horizonte. Soulignant la présence de la diversité, de la collectivité et des agendas politiques dans leur formation, les jeunes ponctuent la prise de conscience sociale comme un impact significatif de ce processus. L'expérience théâtrale artistique et pédagogique a été configurée comme un espace de socialisation, de positivation des identités des jeunes subalternes et a contribué à leurs processus d'émancipation en tant que sujets sociaux.

Mots-clés: **Formation Théâtrale. Éducation Populaire. Culture Populaire. Émancipation. Jeunesse.**

RESUMO – Formação Teatral Marcada pela Educação Popular e Cultura Popular: um meio de emancipação para jovens – O artigo discute os sentidos que jovens periféricos atribuem à sua experiência de formação teatral marcada pela educação popular e pela cultura popular em uma instituição de ensino em Belo Horizonte. Destacando a presença da diversidade, da coletividade e de pautas políticas na sua formação, os jovens apontam a conscientização social como impacto significativo desse processo. A experiência artístico-pedagógica teatral se configurou como espaço de socialização, positivação de identidades de jovens subalternizados e contribuiu para os seus processos de emancipação como sujeitos sociais.

Palavras-chave: **Formação Teatral. Educação Popular. Cultura Popular. Emancipação. Juventudes.**

Introduction

The fields of culture and art have proven to be powerful spaces of socialization for young people. Certain experiences provided through engagement with art in collective actions value the knowledge and culture specific to youth, affirming their identities, enabling a movement of self-construction and affirmation in society, and generating processes of human and social formation – especially for young people from underprivileged backgrounds (Dayrell, 2003; 2005b; 2007). As victims of systemic material and symbolic inequality, poor youth find in spaces of popular education and culture the possibility – denied in other contexts – to live formative experiences, recognizing and constituting themselves as subjects of rights and social agents (Dayrell; Carrano, 2003).

This article presents some reflections arising from a research (Paula, 2020) that sought to understand the meanings attributed by young people to their theatrical training, initially experienced in a free course and later in a technical one in an education institution in the city of Belo Horizonte. The study was based on the premise of theater education linked to a perspective of human formation that offers learning experiences beyond content transmission and technical knowledge development, involving the possibility of constructing knowledge and skills connected to a critical view of social reality in the pursuit of subject emancipation. Which marks, memories, and lessons did the theatrical training experienced by young people in such an environment leave? To what extent does theater stay within young people and form part of their worldviews, plans, dreams, identities and subjectivities?

The research methodology was qualitative and utilized different procedures. Initially, narrative interviews were conducted with six young students from the chosen institution to understand their interpretations about their own experiences with theater and the impact they had on their lives. Then, a creative process was undertaken, in which the six subjects acted as actresses and actors, using the autobiographical content shared in the interviews about their relationship with theater as the basis for creation. The creative process culminated in a theatrical play, shared with the public, which reflected the research results beyond academic circles, producing scenic discourses that also served as analysis. The data collected from interviews and

the creative process, as well as the presentations of the play, were content analyzed. Some excerpts from the research subjects' narratives are included in this article for illustrative and argumentative purposes.

The choice of the research topic was made due to the recognition that there are still few investigations in the fields of education and theater that address the articulation of youth, theatrical training, and their social dimensions. It seems relevant to think of theatrical training in a broader dimension, addressing its human, sociological, and political aspects, as well as the perceptions of students regarding such teaching processes. In this sense, the aim is to contribute to reflections within the realm of theater education by demonstrating the educational properties of theatrical training from the perspective of young people from underprivileged backgrounds.

Youths, Socialization, and Identity

In the context of the research, youth is not understood merely as a transitional phase; it is a life stage that holds inherent significance (Carrano, 2000; Dayrell; Carrano, 2014). Dayrell (2007) asserts that youth is a social category constructed according to the historical time, social environment, and cultural orientations with which it interacts. Characterized by diversity, youth cannot be experienced uniformly by different individuals; therefore, using “youths”, in the plural, seems more appropriate to signify the multiple possibilities of being young in current times.

Pais (2001) compares the trajectories of young people to networks of hyper-textualities, characterized by multiplicity, decentering, constant construction, and juxtaposition of elements – an entanglement of overlapping features that configure experiences (Reis, 2013). In essence, the logic of reversibility marks young people's lives with discontinuities, fragmentations, and fluctuations in back-and-forth movements (Pais, 2001; Dayrell; Carrano, 2014; Reis, 2013). Although the ways of experiencing youth are diverse, there are common characteristics that tend to apply to most young individuals: it is a time of discoveries, of experimentations of the self and of possibilities, and exercising of autonomy – an essential and opportune stage for identity construction through socialization (Dayrell; Carrano, 2014).

Socialization can be understood as the individual's interaction within social environments, but it is an interaction that shapes and educates. In the

past, socialization was viewed as the internalization and reproduction of social codes traditionally transmitted in institutions such as schools, churches, and families, but in contemporary times, it has taken on a more plural and relational character (Reis, 2013). That is, socialization is no longer seen merely as a process of integrating individuals into society; rather, it is understood as a social and procedural action marked by “the reciprocity of messages and symbolic goods between socializing agencies and agents” (Setton, 2016, p. 32).

The plural dynamics of socialization and the intense circulation of information and symbolic goods result in a pluralizing effect on contemporary individuals’ possibilities of identification, making identities less fixed, less unified, and more decentered (Hall, 2001). Identity is like a *movable celebration* (Hall, 2001), with no static and definitive fixation (Melucci, 2004). Although immersed in a diverse social universe, individuals, in their process of social construction and identity formation, are not passive and take on a reflective stance, interpreting, judging, selecting, questioning, and more (Setton, 2016). Thus, it can be affirmed that contemporary identity construction has as one of its pillars the reflexivity of individuals engaged in this phenomenon; however, it would be “[...] impossible to rigidly separate individual aspects from relational and social aspects of identity” (Melucci, 2004, p. 45).

In this exercise of weaving and being woven, individuals experience identity processes through various socialization experiences. According to Dayrell and Carrano (2014), young people are most affected by contemporary multiple socialization and the increased circulation of information from the dynamics of the cultural industry, as they are the main recipients of the symbolic goods produced by it. However, it is necessary to emphasize that material and symbolic goods are unequally distributed, and this directly reflects on the identity processes of young people from underprivileged backgrounds, who often miss out cultural and educational experiences that could be essential to their social construction (Dayrell; Carrano, 2014; Carrano, 2008).

Involvement in collective actions, such as cultural activities and social movements, is directly related to identity construction and serves as fertile elements for analysis in an attempt to understand it (Melucci, 2004). Aligning

with this notion, Dayrell (2007) states that the universe of culture and art has proven to be an important space for the socialization of young people from underprivileged backgrounds. Within this realm, elements are incorporated that positively characterize their identities and serve as symbolic expressions of their movements for affirmation, recognition, and autonomy in a hegemonic society that offers so few opportunities for marginalized youth. Furthermore, in the present research, such actions and practices are marked by popular education and culture, which will be discussed further below.

Popular Education and Popular Culture

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the consolidation of the capitalist economic system, new social configurations were driven by the bourgeoisie's capital accumulation, leading them to employ educational practices in a broad sense to fulfill economic, political, and social dynamics according to their worldview (Pacheco, 2016). In contrast, Paulo Freire (1921-1997), an educator and philosopher of education, created an educational perspective for the people and with the people (Freire, 2000): an education that offers alternatives to the mercantile educational model, is an engine of change and liberation of individuals, encouraging them to write their own history (Pacheco, 2016).

Brandão (1985) affirms that popular education is directed towards the underprivileged classes and is characterized by a social and political commitment through pedagogical work. According to the author, popular education establishes criticism and an attempt to subvert *traditional* education, based on transmission models, efficacy, and maintenance of an excluding capitalist system. Popular education aims to highlight to the educating subjects the forms of domination imposed by the system and, for this purpose, works with the concept of conscientization and social emancipation.

In this conception of education, the valorization of popular culture plays an essential role. Educating for the emancipation of the subject means provoking shifts from the culturally hegemonic domains towards a *new culture* originating from popular and pedagogical acts of people's liberation, reflecting their own beliefs and values (Brandão; Fagundes, 2016). Thus, the notion of popular culture is disassociated from an inferiorized understand-

ing imposed by the elite and gains positive value and broader meaning (Rameh, 2008).

[...] popular culture presents itself as an alternative with transformative and even revolutionary potential in the form of a broad range of cultural and pedagogical actions with political content. [...] Popular Culture ceases to be a scientific concept inherited by social scientists from different scholars of 'popular traditions' to become the key word of an open and multiple political project of social transformation based on the cultures of workers and other social and popular actors (Brandão, 2016, p. 103).

In this sense, popular education is directly associated to *creating popular culture* by engaging in dialogues with subjects and popular collectivities to, through them, transform their consciousness, making them critical and creative authors of their own cultures, with the aim of breaking away from the current order to build a more egalitarian society (Pacheco, 2016). Fávero cited by Rameh (2008, p. 7) states that “[...] culture is popular when it leads the man to assume his role as the subject of his own cultural creation and as a conscious worker in the historical process in which he is inserted”. Thus, emancipatory education is a cultural action for freedom, in which the students are social subjects creators of culture: popular education as a practice is also an action of popular culture creation.

While these concepts of popular education and popular culture have circulated in various academic and educational environments in a perennial manner, contemporary perspectives indicate some changes in their notions. According to Gomes (2020), for instance, unlike past decades when popular education and culture were associated with nationwide liberatory projects, current practices focus on local interests, seeking to address issues on a *micro* level. According to the author, these specific movements are representative of the fragmented and postmodern contemporary context and deal with problems that broader universal movements did not perceive, such as internal forms of oppression, racism, sexism, etc. This new perspective of popular education and culture does not fail to contribute to current social struggles, but Gomes (2020) suggests that it is important to understand them not in isolation but as part of a whole. That is, even though they are situated in local demands, they need to be connected to broader social claims. The localized nature of educational and cultural projects aimed at

the emancipation of individuals may indicate fragility and difficulties in their maintenance if there is no *macro* level interest to sustain them.

In this sense, the young theater students, subjects of the present research, are seen as individuals in the process of constructing their identities, active and reflective participants in this operation, and potential conscious agents and writers of their own cultures and histories. The mark of popular education and culture experienced in the space of socialization through theater training in the researched institution seems to operate on a localized level – at the *micro* level – and as a guide to the emancipation of underprivileged young individuals as social subjects, distancing itself from hegemonic models. Thus, to present how the institution addressed theater training for peripheral youth, connecting popular education and culture, the field and subjects of the research are discussed next.

Research Context: Field and Participant Subjects

Valores de Minas was founded as a social program in the city of Belo Horizonte (BH) in 2005 by the government of the state of Minas Gerais and was enabled through public-private partnerships until 2014. Initially, it offered arts courses to young people between the ages of 14 and 24 from public schools in the following disciplines: theater, dance, visual arts, circus, and music. The main goal of the initiative was to provide art education, linking it to the civic formation of the individuals (Cabral, 2014). Over time, the program gained recognition and became a reference space for arts education and actions aimed at peripheral youth in BH.

This operational model changed from 2015 onwards due to a new administration in the state government. The program, which was under the Department of Culture, was transferred to the Department of Education, and the previously free courses became technical courses, resulting in a state school named Centro Interescolar de Cultura, Arte, Linguagens e Tecnologias (Cicalt). One of the effects of this structural change¹ was a decrease in the number of enrolled young people – whereas hundreds of young individuals were served annually in arts courses before, the number decreased to only a few dozens. Additionally, the school's target audience was no longer exclusively young people, as technical courses, governed by federal regulations, should not impose age limits on interested students.

Regarding the institution's pedagogical proposal, three concepts were the pillars of the free courses: art, education, and citizenship. The educational approach of the institution emphasized the importance of raising awareness among individuals about the reality in which they are immersed, placing them in an emancipatory educational process that sought to value their culture and prior knowledge, and methodologically, it favored alternatives that consider experience as the primary form of knowledge development (Minas Gerais, 2018). The pedagogical proposal of the free courses included content related to socially marginalized groups, and discussions on issues such as race, gender, and sexual orientation were part of daily life at the institution.

Believing in the relevance of arts education and being guided by original pedagogical methodologies, the Program's intention is to promote not only artistic development in young individuals but, above all, human and cultural development, enabling the recognition and exercise of citizenship and social participation, thus making Valores de Minas a social program for art, culture, and citizenship. [...] All artistic fields share the same overall objective, which is to provide young people with the development of artistic, aesthetic, human, and social thinking, characterizing a specific way of organizing and giving meaning to human experience, thereby broadening their sensitivity, perception, and imagination in constructing the knowledge necessary to understand art as a means of humanizing reality and expanding their social participation. We understand art as a way of knowing, humanizing, and transforming senses and producing meanings (Cabral, 2014, p. 26-27).

It can be said that the pedagogical practices were based on democratic and liberating values, and the project sought to offer not only educational experiences in art but also promote a set of activities aimed at the social and human formation of young people.

During the period between 2015 and 2017, the transition to replace the free courses with technical training took place. Teachers from the free courses were invited to write the teaching plans for the technical courses and used the existing pedagogical projects from the free courses to develop those of the technical courses. In this way, the experiences in the free courses were fundamental for the construction of the curricular matrices of the technical courses, transferring content considered relevant for the broader

formation of young individuals, such as topics related to ethics, diversity, and social contexts.

The young individuals who participated in the research were four women and two men, aged between 19 and 24, with two identifying as black, one as *parda* (mixed-race), and three as white. All of them had spent enough time at Valores de Minas – Cicalt² to experience both the free theater course and the technical course. Some common characteristics observed in the participants were that they lived in regions far from the center of BH – considered suburban areas –, and had parents with low levels of education, precarious working conditions within their families. The absence of a father figure predominated, a lack of identification with the regular school environment, and difficulties accessing artistic and cultural activities during childhood and adolescence.

In summary, the context of poverty that marks the youth condition experienced by the research participants is evident. Poverty can be characterized by different aspects, “[...] from the absence of material resources to less tangible aspects related to attitudes, behaviors and self-esteem, the ability to develop life plans, and changes in power relations” (Ribeiro cited in Nonato, 2013, p. 73). Thus, if the research subjects can be considered as poor young individuals, it can be affirmed that this condition permeates their socialization processes, their way of being and positioning in the world, their opportunities, and subjectivities. In other words, the meanings attributed by them to their theater education are marked by elements of their social belonging.

Meanings attributed by the young to the experience of theatrical training

The artistic and pedagogical experiences lived by the young individuals throughout their theatrical training at Valores de Minas - Cicalt, generated a wide range of knowledge in different dimensions, to which the researched subjects attributed meanings that highlight the relevance of theater in their journeys. Although it is understood that the elements of this knowledge network are interconnected and do not present themselves separately in practice, an effort was made to classify the dimensions and meanings identified into categories for analysis and sharing. While all the categories presented below are connected to the popular nature of the theatrical

training experienced, reflections are made about the specific significance of each of them in the young individuals' experiences, showing in detail its effects in the process of positivation of their identities and constructing their critical perspectives on social reality, towards their emancipation.

Intrinsic senses of theater: body in play and connection with other knowledge

All the interviewed youths indicated that a key point in their theatrical training process was the development of a bodily and vocal awareness that generated expanded perceptions of their own corporeality:

[...] this discovery of what my body was capable of doing [...] was super incredible to me. That's when I started to investigate my body and this artistic body. It's not just facial expression, but it's also a very bodily expression. How you throw yourself, how you hold back, and everything else, so that caught my attention a lot (Clara³, interview).

According to Salles (2010), the bodily work in theater demands the deconstruction of a formatted and organized body in the face of social demands to meet its expressive possibilities, opening space for corporeality in another dimension, more conscious and broader. Since the body is commonly an element worked in theater training processes, it is relevant to remember that it has been continuously repressed and socially dominated over time (Charlot, 2013). Therefore, artistic-pedagogical experiences must be attentive to this aspect, avoiding the creation of new harmful bodily conditioning in learners. With that said, the theatrical techniques and exercises involving the body in the training at Valores de Minas - Cicalt would not serve to condition it, but to make actors and actresses aware of their conditioning and thus transcend it. According to the youths, the bodily work in theater was able to encompass, at the same time, a redefinition of old perceptions and a reintegration of their potentialities as subjects, generating self-awareness and the construction of knowledge that challenges socially established body standards.

Additionally, the bodily work opened new perceptions about the very conception of theater and its creative forms:

I thought that I would arrive here; they would give me a script and say, 'read it, we're going to do Romeo and Juliet'. But no, they never gave me a script and said 'read it', which I find very cool, actually, because I didn't have any basis to know

what theater was like. When I got here, we did scenic games, trust exercises, and exercises to get us used to the fact that in theater, we're going to come into contact with people's bodies, which I also find very important to do (Brianna, interview).

The statement indicates that, before joining Valores de Minas - Cicalt, the young person held a traditional and text-centric idea of how to do theater, which excluded the involvement of the body. According to Charlot (2013), there is a social tendency to value the knowledge that can be translated into words over those rooted in the body, and in theater, there was a prevailing view of staging based on playwrights, which was considered superior. However, this hegemonic view of staging is being deconstructed for various reasons, including the influence of popular cultural expressions that have their matrix in the body and movement. According to Pupo (2015), the educational aspect of contemporary staging lies in breaking down dominant patterns of theatrical consumption and in its possibility of renewing forms, which seems to have occurred from the experiences lived in Valores de Minas - Cicalt, generating new perceptions about how to do theater.

The youths also mentioned that the theatrical language allowed them to develop knowledge about the technical elements of stage composition and understanding of theater management, production, and teaching. Additionally, the youths commented on the study of history, sociology, politics, and culture from the theatrical field. Therefore, another sense attributed to the artistic-pedagogical experiences in theater by the youths is the capacity of this language to relate to other knowledge, themes, and fields of study.

According to Koudela and Almeida Júnior (2015), theater itself provides the possibility of articulating with other languages, content, and topics, and Trozzo (2016), in agreement, points out that theatrical content involves varied cognitive operations and relates to diverse fields, contributing to the broader human formation of students. Benevides (2013) also affirms that this aggregating characteristic of theater assists in expanding students' perception of reality, progressively leading them to assume themselves as social and historical beings.

Thus, having contact with non-hegemonic theatrical practices seems to have been an affirmation for the youths in constructing their own ways of staging and performing, a validation of their knowledge and cultures. At the same time, establishing connections with other subjects through theater

indicates an expansion of critical knowledge. Both aspects contributed to their identity processes as stage artists and social individuals.

Senses of the Collective Dimension: Sociability, Diversity, and Democratic Principles

The dimension of collectivity was a continuously present element in the accounts of the surveyed youths regarding their experiences at Valores de Minas - Cicalt. According to the youths, this collectivity manifests in different ways in the institution's daily life, including the encouragement and circulation of democratic principles in the community's interactions and forms of sociability.

Among the teaching topics addressed at Valores de Minas - Cicalt, one frequently mentioned in the youths' testimonies is the holding of assemblies:

We always had assemblies. We had to learn how to conduct assemblies and discuss, there was no voting, it was consensus. So, there were some assemblies that lasted four or five days, interrupting classes. Literally interrupting classes and spending four hours on the dance floor debating. [...] There was a board where we would write all our criticisms and compliments about what was happening. I think this is something important in any process (Pablo, interview).

In the pedagogical political project of Valores de Minas - Cicalt, the assembly is presented as “[...] an institutional moment of speech, dialogue, where the collective gathers to reflect, become aware of itself, and attempt to transform everything that members consider appropriate” (Minas Gerais, 2018, p. 16). This meeting between educators and students was part of the methodology of the institution's free courses; aiming to stimulate a political and democratic exercise, where the subject constructs his/her citizenship through the practice of participation in the collective.

Dayrell and Carrano (2014) state that the participatory experience is inherently educational and, in the context of youth, provides individuals with not only the experience of organizing as a group and taking collective action but also the experience of values such as democracy and solidarity. According to the authors, learning alterity in such an individualistic society can be decisive for young people who, through their participatory action, learn to recognize and respect differences, feeling like part of a whole, developing as political subjects.

The forms of sociability within Valores de Minas - Cicalt were also highlighted as a relevant element in their theatrical training experience. All the youths expressed having significant friendships, partnerships, and relationships cultivated within the institution.

According to Dayrell (2001), the sociability that occurs in the school's daily life reveals an educational dimension that goes beyond the classroom. From this perspective, the school, beyond its content and class dynamics, becomes a space "for debating ideas, confronting values and worldviews, which interfere in the process of students' formation and education" (Dayrell, 2001, p. 150). Sociability meets young people's needs for communication, affective exchanges, solidarity, democracy, and identity construction (Dayrell; Carrano, 2014).

Beyond the importance of sociability itself, a characteristic pointed out by the youths adds to their relationships – the diversity of people and identities at Valores de Minas - Cicalt:

Because here it's very diverse, you know, it's not like a school in the southern zone, where all the girls are the same. If you see a group of girls from Colégio Santa Maria going out together, you won't know who's who because everyone is pretty much the same, you know. And here it's very different, here you see all kinds of people (Ana, interview).

By observing the social dynamics in the school, it is notable that there are individuals with various racial, gender, and sexual identifications. The youths affirm that the pedagogical approach of the institution – which seeks to recognize, respect, and value diversity –, also extends to relationships outside the classroom. In this sense, it can be stated that the coexistence with differences in the relationships established during theatrical training was a contributing factor to the broader human formation of individuals, as it fosters the learning of living in a group, the notion of alterity, and democratic principles.

We start to understand people's rights, living in harmony, with respect, equality. Some people don't see that equality is good; they believe inequality is the best. So, when someone says, 'This black person is just whining', they don't understand that it's a whole construction that leads to another, and another [...]. That's what we advocate for in Valores [de Minas], and people say we become too militant. But that's it, here we build citizens, thoughtful people who think before speaking or acting, who put themselves in someone else's shoes (Maísa, interview).

The democratic nature is present in this exercise of coexistence because, by observing differences, developing social awareness and alterity, young people are invited to “play together” (Dayrell, 2005a). Therefore, considering the convivial and relational dimension inherent in theater (Dubatti, 2007), the research field becomes a space for experiencing and producing relationships based on diversity, which is a potentially positive element for the identity processes of the youths.

Meanings of the Political Dimension: Engaged Performances and City Occupation

It was observed that, in their training at Valores de Minas - Cicalt, the surveyed youths organized and took part in objective forms of participation through theater – whether in the internal social environment of the school or in the city. According to the subjects’ testimonies, theatrical work was developed as a way to think and act in society, propelling them to become aware and become part of a whole as they create and present their theatrical creations, actively positioning themselves as citizen-artists in the urban fabric.

In this regard, one element that drew attention was the importance of the language of performance affirmed by the youths in their training. Some performances developed by the research subjects during their training had themes such as the objectification of women, contemporary mental exhaustion, and religious oppression on sexual orientation. The engagement with this language expresses a desire to touch the political ground of relationships, where individuals debate about rights, injustices, and norms that affect the collective. According to Fabião (2008), performance seems to hold remarkable political relevance today; it is a manifestation that uses aesthetic elements to provoke tensions about the reality we live in. If the youths in the research are interested in this thematic, it can be inferred that involvement with performance is part of a formation process as citizens permeated by art.

In addition to their interest in performance, the youths reported that the involvement of social and political themes in theatrical presentations was common, demonstrating that the performances served as a platform for their denunciations and reflections. The political content of their artistic presentations during their theatrical training is another aspect that reveals the comprehensive educational approach present in the pedagogical foundations of Valores de Minas - Cicalt. The possibility of creating artistic works

that in some way expressed their opinions and impressions about society and how they interact with it became a relevant sense for the youths, demonstrating in practice the integration of theater with other topics, such as social and political issues.

As mentioned, all the youths claimed to have faced difficulties in accessing cultural events and venues during their childhood and adolescence, mainly attributing the lack of resources and information as impediments or obstacles to such access. However, when observing their habits of engaging in leisure activities, it was noticed that there was a change in the possibility of accessing artistic programs. Before joining Valores de Minas - Cicalt, access to such programs was quite restricted, but after joining, it became more intense.

The youths mentioned in the interview that a common practice at Valores de Minas - Cicalt is the distribution of complimentary tickets offered to the school by theater groups or cultural producers. Besides the occasional distribution of tickets, another initiative mentioned was the “cultural outings” in the city.

In module III [of the free course], which I emphasize a lot, we went out to explore the city. In module III, we do this type of activity. It's for the student to get to know the city, to know the places where they can do art and such. [...] it was also an important moment to recognize our bodies in the city, to know places and to know that we can be there (Maísa, interview).

According to Andrade (2009), the dynamics in large cities result in the exclusion of the population due to difficulties in accessing culture, leisure, work, and education. This makes it so that poor people are excluded from the spaces where these opportunities are concentrated, and over time, they become accustomed to this and tend to remain within their own *worlds*. The young person's statement suggests that she did not feel like she belonged to that region of the city, as if she could not frequent it and enjoy its cultural offerings. Thus, the encouragement built by Valores de Minas - Cicalt to get to know the city, to occupy it, became a device for deconstructing values, an important element in the educational process. Moving around the city is not just leisure; it has an educational dimension and offers the possibility of reaching cultural spaces and activities that are important for the youths' formation as artists and individuals.

As Andrade (2009, p. 77-78) states:

Another issue is related to the future, that is, getting to know the city, with its various possibilities, can also contribute to the expansion of future opportunities, including those related to work. It is important to emphasize the importance of choice, which in many cases is not within the possibilities of young people from the peripheries of big cities. For many of them, there is not much to choose from, given the few possibilities they have access to. Appropriating the city can then expand the possibilities of choice for young people [...].

Considering the accounts about the encouragement of contact of the students with the city, it can be said that this is a dimension of Valores de Minas – Cicalt’s pedagogical approach that proved to be important for the formation of the surveyed young people. As Andrade (2009) affirms, by leaving their neighborhoods, they can see and be seen by the city, accessing and appropriating cultural and symbolic goods. By being present in the urban fabric, they can bring new stimuli to their broader formation as individuals, to the process of constructing their identities, and to their social emancipation.

Individual Dimension Meanings: Racial Affirmation and Life Projects

Racial identity was another relevant element when analyzing the trajectories of the research subjects at Valores de Minas - Cicalt. The two young individuals who identify as Black affirmed that the institution’s artistic and pedagogical practices were crucial for their process of racial affirmation.

Valores de Minas changed my life. Knowing that this place made me who I am, knowing that I am Black... A few days ago, I was with my mother and my nephew, I don’t remember what we were doing, but I turned to him and said, ‘It’s because we are Black!’ My mother looked at me and said, ‘I found it so beautiful that you say you are Black because before you didn’t identify yourself that way’. And indeed, I used to say that I was brown, *pardo* [mixed-race], *mulato*, but I never said I was Black. There’s a photo, which I can show you later, from a time when I used Photoshop to lighten my skin tone as much as possible, I put blue contact lenses in my eyes, and that was the photo I used for my Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. One day, I tried to straighten my hair, and it went wrong. So, I had to go to class like that, and I decided to wear a cap. My theater teacher turned to me and said, ‘Take off that cap! No one can attend class wearing a cap or a hat’. So I had to take it off, and it was the first time the guys saw my hair as it is. They

said, ‘Wow, your hair is curly, why don’t you let it grow?’ And then I thought, ‘Why don’t I let it grow?’ So, I started growing it out. Since then, I only wear it in a natural Afro style. Whenever I look at my hair, I can’t help but remember Valores de Minas. Whenever someone asks me about my racial identity, and I proudly say that I am Black, I remember Valores de Minas (Pablo, dramatic text from the play).

Pablo’s testimony clearly reflects the trend of imposing white and Eurocentric beauty standards witnessed in society. The positive recognition of his physical characteristics by his peers was essential for his process of constructing a Black identity, in which hair and skin color play a significant role. Gomes (2003, p. 171) indicates that “ [...] building a positive Black identity in a society that historically teaches Black individuals, from an early age, that they must deny themselves to be accepted is a challenge faced by Brazilians of African descent”. Thus, when this process of building a positive self-image about one’s racial identity effectively occurs, the individual regains self-esteem and confidence (Munanga, 2005).

Despite the significant role that the experiences at Valores de Minas - Cicalt presented for the young individuals who self-identified as Black regarding racial issues, the effect seems to have been different for the young white individuals and the young *parda* (mixed-race) woman. In general, the young white individuals had difficulty reflecting on their racial process, and the young *parda* woman – who even stated that she was uncertain about her race⁴ – revealed many doubts, uncertainties, and anxieties when considering her racial belonging. This demonstrates that, as an institution, Valores de Minas - Cicalt demonstrated preparedness to positively engage Black students in their processes of racial reflection. However, there is a certain deficiency in addressing racial issues directed towards white and *pardos* (mixed-race) young students.

Another element identified in the accounts of the young participants that is connected to the effects of theater education on an individual dimension is related to their future projects. Based on the testimonies, it is clear that all the young individuals expressed the desire to keep theater in their lives:

Theater is where I want to be, where I have to be, I can’t see myself elsewhere, you know? I can’t see myself behind a desk, in an office, doing other things... I think it will be difficult, not easy. But I think it will be different. I don’t know how to

think, how theater will be in my life, but I believe I'll be more connected to the world. It makes me feel more connected, theater makes me feel more connected to life (Maísa, interview).

The theme of life projects also emerged during the creative process. The final scene of the play revolved around projections the young participants made for their future. In the scene, their group reunited in the year 2040, and different characters were created to represent their life projects with theater: the performer, the actress, the art educator, the producer, the writer, and the theater teacher.

According to Leão, Dayrell, and Reis (2011), life projects are choices individuals make based on different perspectives they envision for their future, transforming desires into objectives and actions in a dynamic process. For these authors, these plans may involve various aspects of life, such as emotions, education, finances, among others, and are directly related to the socioeconomic and cultural reality each young person belongs to. In identity processes, life projects play a relevant role as they motivate individuals to reflect on what they want, what they do not want, and especially on what may not have been a possibility before but becomes one.

According to Faria and Dayrell (2018), artistic work, in general, is often marked by difficulties such as low remuneration, doubts artists have about their own productions, the fragility of employment bonds, and the seasonality of professional opportunities. Therefore, when marginalized youth are aware of the challenges they will face in the artistic work field and still choose it; it indicates a high degree of personal fulfillment. In this regard, Valores de Minas - Cicalt played a relevant role in the process of constructing life projects for the youth, creating suitable spaces to reflect, provide information, and help develop important skills and competencies for this elaboration.

“Eu sou Valores de coração, nesse lugar eu me tornei um cidadão”²⁵

The above sentence, used as a subtitle for this section of the text, was repeated in chorus by the students of Valores de Minas - Cicalt at the end of the performances they presented. Watching hundreds of young people collectively and enthusiastically shouting these words was an overwhelming experience. Any spectator could affirm that the artistic training journey ex-

perienced by those young individuals had been transformative beyond the realms of artistic languages. Many testimonies from the young theater students collected in the research indicated the same:

I started growing here, and I am starting to occupy other places in the city, starting to do other things, and it was because of Valores de Minas. So, it's like these seeds from here, not just us but everyone who comes here, they change in some way. Regardless of whether you will pursue a career in the arts or not [...] the main idea of Valores, which is to create citizens through art, it multiplies and goes to various places. Not only in the artistic field, but you change yourself from here with different experiences, not just because of the classes, but because of the audience we have here (Clara, interview).

I think that the way how... how I changed, I mean, my perception of life. That was the most significant. Besides learning about art and such, I think the citizenship that this place presents and proposes for us is the most significant part of Valores. I think the way we work as a group, how we respect people and recognize ourselves as individuals too, I think that is the most significant part... I think empowerment as well, art transformed me a lot as a person; before, I had very low self-esteem. It's education (Maísa, interview).

I'm very proud to say that Valores [de Minas] completely changed my thought, opened my mind... And I think theater enters this political aspect for me too, not in the partisan sense, but in the socio-political sense. I want to create projects that I will take to the favelas and transform the lives of those who didn't have opportunities like me. I want theater in my future to be through me, as a transformative agent for lives, as it was for me. Most of the students who passed through here, who are now art educators, and many others who went through the same process as me, understand how transformative this artistic process is (Pablo, interview).

Thus, it can be said that the knowledge developed by the young researched at Valores de Minas - Cicalt constitutes a network of knowledges that goes beyond the technical aspects of theater. Their formative experiences stem from the theatrical universe but seem to extend far beyond it. The discovery of bodily potentialities alongside the deconstruction of social body standards; the development of theatrical concepts that challenge hegemonic staging patterns; theater as a connector to other subjects; diverse sociability; democratic principles for coexistence; the political nature of the performances; the occupation of the city; the racial affirmation; and life projects that include theater, are briefly the meanings attributed by the

youth to their theater training and are considered relevant to their broader human development.

It is identified that the formative experience in theater at Valores de Minas - Cicalt is marked by principles of popular education and popular culture, promoting for the young students a socialization permeated by art that generates symbolic and behavioral elements that positively influence their identity processes. Popular education (Brandão, 1985; Freire, 2000) and popular culture (Brandão, 2016; Pacheco, 2016; Rameh, 2008) are dialectically present there, as while theater is taught based on the premise of developing the young people's social and critical thought, it also encourages them to create their own art, their own theater, their own ways of thinking, acting, and relating. It can be said that the emancipatory pedagogical process creates a culture localized within Valores de Minas - Cicalt and originating from it: a popular culture that empowers marginalized youth to positively affirm their identities as citizens and pursue continuity of actions for their freedom while challenging the paradigms of the hegemonic and dominant culture.

Viganó (2006) reminds us that the transgressive nature of theater can also aid in the deconstruction of imposed social standards and be a partner to young people in constructing their identity, exploring new possibilities of being and expressing themselves.

Theater, combined with socio-cultural action, does not aim to create a pre-determined horizon, nor a practice focused on consumption and spectacle. It seeks an attitude that breaks barriers and broadens the awareness of those who experience it, undoing stereotypes, uncertainties, and prejudices, articulating desires and worldviews through artistic discourse. By investigating the effective possibilities of socio-cultural action, we move in this direction. We seek to make theater a meeting: of men with themselves, of men with other men. Of men who live their experiences to later narrate them. And in narrating them, they become masters of their lives, establish the link between the past and the future, define their choices, and by sharing and confronting them with others', they build History (Viganó, 2006, p. 39).

In a similar direction, Koudela and Almeida Júnior (2015, p. 12) affirm that in theater teaching and learning processes, "[...] art and pedagogy work together, giving birth to new aesthetic and sociocultural qualities that transform the very concept and theatrical practice". Moreover, Benevides

(2013, p. 185) states that theater training, coupled with the process of awareness-raising, configures as “[...] a movement of resignifying the place of the whole individual in the environment he/she is inserted in; an individual and collective experience that puts individuals in contact to make them exist in another dimension”. In summary, the authors agree that theater training has the power to generate new notions, perceptions, and dimensions for the learning subjects, which is understood here, due to the research context, as the creation of a new culture developed within Valores de Minas - Cicalt. A culture through educational action and an education through cultural action, popular in their perspective, led by marginalized youth towards emancipation.

It can be said that the sensitization and awareness of social injustices and the historical processes that underlie them began to unfold for the youth amid their theater training experience at Valores de Minas - Cicalt, and the understanding of themselves as citizens with rights and responsibilities can bring other perspectives on living in society. Thus, the overarching pedagogical principle anchoring the institution’s educational practices called *citizenship* is an umbrella that involves socialization and the production of positive identities for marginalized youth through principles of popular education and culture materialized through art.

Final Considerations

In this study, it was possible to reflect on the meanings attributed by young individuals to their theater training experience at Valores de Minas - Cicalt, identifying that the pedagogical perspective of the institution that served as the field is marked by principles of popular education and popular culture. For the research subjects, it was a socializing experience that potentialized their identities, incorporated learnings from theatrical art, and also elements of a broader educational process.

The transformations in the social, political, and individual dimensions pointed out by the young are results of a pedagogical process that aimed to trigger critical awareness of the systems of social oppression, leading to the liberation of the students. It can be said that the teaching method at Valores de Minas - Cicalt cultivates popular culture through popular education, that is, educates marginalized individuals in socially conscious artistic forms

and reflections, challenging the dominant culture through processes of socialization and knowledge construction that are guided by the emancipation of the youth. From this perspective, popular culture is present throughout the formative experience at Valores de Minas - Cicalt, as its cultivation generates symbolic elements that will feed back into the education system itself.

That said, it is relevant to point out that currently, the institution – the only school in the state of Minas Gerais that offers technical training in the arts – suffers with the precarization and neglect due to the lack of a more attentive approach from those responsible for Education in the state who fail to comprehend the specific demands necessary for teaching Art. After the structural changes that occurred at Valores de Minas - Cicalt, each passing year becomes a struggle for the survival of the school. There are unusable rooms due to lack of maintenance, insufficient materials or resources for artistic productions, decreasing enrollment, and more recently, the school has integrated regular education, diverting focus from the technical courses in the arts.

The gradual neglect and decay of a public facility destined for youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds can be seen as a symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998), an action that perpetuates and reaffirms the social inequality present in society in the school space, and that can happen in indirect ways. Public policies defending youth as subjects of rights have been recent achievements and have demonstrated governmental concern and consideration for the specificities of this group (Carrano, 2013). However, in the reported scenario, it can be inferred that such policies are currently experiencing a moment of fragility.

Therefore, it is essential to know and disseminate reflections arising from formative experiences like that of Valores de Minas - Cicalt through different means. It is necessary to maintain an active debate on the social rights of youth and the importance of art, culture, and education as spaces for socialization, identity construction, and autonomy for them.

Notes

- ¹ Other negative consequences strongly affected the school community. However, they will not be addressed here, as it is understood that, despite being relat-

ed to the topic at hand, they would divert the focus of this article. The reading of the dissertation that originated this work is recommended for more information and reflections on the effects of the neglect of public policies focused on education and culture, targeting youth as the audience.

- ² From this point on, the name Valores de Minas - Cicalt will be used to refer to the institution, as it is understood that, despite the structural changes, the institution has a history that should be observed for its continuity and not for its ruptures.
- ³ In order to preserve the identity of the youth, all names used are fictitious and were chosen by the individuals themselves.
- ⁴ The young individual preferred not to declare her racial identity; therefore, the category of “*parda*” (mixed-race) was established based on hetero-identification.
- ⁵ “I am Valores at heart, in this place, I became a citizen”.

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