Voicing versus silencing: education for peace in contexts of violence

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

While most curricula addressing violence and peace are developed in privileged contexts, this paper reconsiders existing approaches to peace education from the perspective of communities affected by high levels of violence. In-depth analysis of the educational goals and practices of teachers in Brazilian slums demonstrates how they construct different levels of resistance to violence despite contextual restrictions. Teachers combined a restrictive approach with an ethic of care to create peaceful alternatives, while making use of their community position. The analyses underline the transformational potential of educational environments, while acknowledging the intricate dynamics of violence that narrow opportunities for change. Correspondingly, the paper considers how a critical understanding of the community context can inform peace educational programmes that aim for transformation.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, children's exposure to a violent environment and the harmful impact on their wellbeing and development has generated deep concern around the globe and various reports have stressed the need for an effective response (UNESCO, 2017; UNICEF, 2016; WHO, 2014). Consequently, violence prevention and peace building have become an increasingly pressing issue in education (UNESCO, 2017). However, despite the reasonable body of knowledge on education in violent neighbourhoods, curricula addressing issues of violence and peace are being developed predominantly in 'elite' contexts that generally keep a large distance from violence (Bajaj, 2015). This might limit possibilities to apply such programmes in contexts where they are most needed. In this paper we therefore intend to contribute to the existing perspectives on education for peace, by investigating educational practices in community preschools located in the violent context of Brazilian slums. We document the goals and practices of educators who both live and teach in these neighbourhoods and analyse how they formulate an educational response to violence. Finally, we consider how these responses provide input for an alternative paradigm to peace education that is born from resistance to violence. Based on Abowitz's (2000) revision of resistance theory, we combine insights from (critical) peace education and social dynamics of violence to outline a community-informed approach to peace education. These various perspectives function as building blocks for such a context-based paradigm in order to reveal subtle ways of resistance in the risky context of communities affected by high levels of violence.

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1.1. A community-informed perspective on resistance to violence

The impact of a violent neighbourhood context on child development has been well documented, demonstrating negative behavioural and emotional outcomes, including aggression, gang involvement and post-traumatic stress disorder (Overstreet, 2000). In search of solutions, evidence on the role of supportive school environments in buffering negative community processes and fostering resilience in youth affected by violence is increasing (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Lindstrom Johnson, 2014; Gaias, 2018; O'Donnell, Roberts, & Schwab-Stone, 2011; Yablon, 2015). While educational programmes for improving school climate and peace building have been globally accepted as helpful in providing safe learning environments (UNESCO, 2017), to our knowledge, the social dynamics in communities affected by violence and the contextual obstacles that might interfere with their translation into practice are often overlooked. Whereas community engagement might improve educational efforts in conflict-affected environments (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2014) and is of considerable significance for establishing school safety (UNESCO, 2017). Before considering educational approaches to address issues of violence and peace in schools, we therefore first explore the topic from a community perspective.

Exposure to high rates of violence has far-reaching consequences for community life. In her ethnographic work on Brazilian *favelas*, Perlman (2010) describes the escalation in gang-related violence and its devastating impact on the communities under study. In addition to the numerous effects on individuals and families, Perlman explores how violence erodes community life. The unpredictability of violent outbursts means the loss of public space as an area for social activities. Her findings show that since the upsurge of gang violence, incurred by the drug trade, community cohesion has hampered. This is reflected in decreased social interaction, weaker trust in neighbours and reduced membership of community organisations.

Similarly, Das, Kleinman, Ramphele and Reynolds (2000) consider the ways in which violence shapes people's everyday life. They argue that violence produces intricate social dynamics, in particular when perpetrators, victims and witnesses are all embedded in the same social space. Das and Kleinman (2000) describe how a 'dominant ecology of fear' (p. 11) inhibits agency, restricts possibilities to actively resist violence, and virtually dictates community life. For example, in violent neighbourhoods in the US, high levels of fear – induced by high rates of violent crime – have been found to constrain social interaction and the willingness to engage in informal social control, thereby undermining solidarity and a sense of unity among residents (Bellair, 2000; Liska & Warner, 1991). Liska and Warner (1991) argue that street violence reduces most social interaction to private places, because people choose to stay at home and withdraw from public social life to avoid victimisation. Although this coping mechanism might be considered destructive for community cohesion, their analysis demonstrates that narrowing routine daily activities to the home environment, indeed is an effective strategy to reduce the risk of falling victim to violence because people remain in the relatively secured space of their homes.

Despite these apparent limitations, people in violent environments might enact various forms of resistance beneath the surface. In absence of possibilities to actively resist violence, refusing to participate in violent events and other acts of avoidance might be considered a direct expression of disapproval (Penglase, 2014; Spencer, 2000). For example, in the violent context of *favelas* risks are managed through 'social tactics' to create 'temporary spaces of autonomy' without challenging the power system (Penglase, 2014). Penglase (2014) argues that for *favela* residents, living with insecurity in a context that is beyond their control means knowing how to evade risks and obstacles in their daily lives. For example, by deliberately not taking sides and feigning ignorance about crime to achieve longer-term survival.

A useful conceptual framework to interpret such coping practices as expressions of opposition, is offered by Abowitz's (2000) revision of resistance theory. Applying Dewey's modes of inquiry, she distinguishes between interactionist and transactionalist understandings of resistance, characterising the first as acts of *opposition* in direct response to oppression, and the latter as acts of *resistance* referring to a more complex social dynamic, modifying social positions of all parties involved. Spencer's (2000) and Penglase's (2014) analyses offer examples of how community practices move beyond the level of merely coping towards interactionist expressions of opposition, focused on the rejection of violence by learning how to navigate a violent context without becoming directly involved in it. A transactionalist approach, however, focuses on the transformative character of acts of resistance, aiming to create changes in the systemic context. While resistance theory in education focuses on student opposition to a dominant school culture, Abowitz's revision might also offer a framework to analyse different levels of opposition and resistance to violence, and how these are constructed in educational spaces.

1.2. Teaching for transformation through an ethic of care

School policies in violent neighbourhoods often focus on repressive measures such as metal detectors, police patrol and 'zero tolerance' (e.g. suspension, expulsion) to cope with violence (Noguera, 1995; UNESCO, 2017). Following Abowitz's (2000) framework, such measures might be considered acts of opposition to violence, aimed to control the situation yet not necessarily to create change. Several scholars criticise this exclusive focus on maintaining order and control, and argue that such coercive strategies cultivate violence and oppression (Noguera, 1995; Williams, 2017). They advocate for a more dialogic approach, involving a higher level of student participation, enhanced teachers' understanding of their pupils' neighbourhood context, and caring relationships between teachers and pupils. These are basic elements of an 'ethic of care', invested in disrupting the cycle of violence by creating

caring communities in schools. Central to this concept is that teachers model caring as 'a moral way of life' towards their students, based on affective connections between all people involved in the school environment, marked by compassion, tolerance and empathy (Noddings, 2012). Such a perspective ties in with the ideas of Freire (2018), who emphasised the importance of personal engagement between teachers and students and considered the commitment to work collectively towards a more just society as an act of love. According to Freire (2018), re-creating the world happens through dialogue, through an encounter between people in 'praxis', in action-reflection. Dialogue, as a transformative practice, he argues, cannot exist without love, it is founded on the commitment to others and to improving their situation. This caring aspect of teaching often plays a central role in both the personal and the professional identity of teachers, shaped by their involvement in local community contexts and closely linked to their practices in the classroom (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Lasky, 2005).

While repressive measures directed at the containment of violence in schools can be interpreted as coping practices or acts of opposition that might even reproduce patterns of violence, due to its transformative ambitions an ethic of care might be considered an act of resistance to violence by modelling peaceful patterns. The ethic of care can therefore be considered one of the manifold approaches in peace education, that despite its various manifestations is unified in the aim to teach 'nonviolence, love, compassion and reverence for all life' (Harris & Morrison, 2013, p.11). Besides providing knowledge about war and peace, overall peace education programmes teach conflict resolution skills including listening, cooperation and reflection to promote peace, social justice and human rights and as such contribute to establishing caring relations in communities (Bajaj, 2015; Noddings, 2008).

1.3. Educating for peace in violent contexts

Founded on Freire's principle of inspiring 'critical optimism', peace education strives to enable students to become agents of social change (Bajaj, 2008). However, Freire (2014) cautioned for a counterproductive cultivation of hope without a critical understanding of the social conditions and contextual obstacles that inhibit agency and narrow possibilities for change. When peace education is disconnected from social reality, it might result in the dissemination of 'lovely principles that stand little chance of translation into practice' (Noddings, 2008, p. 90). Since most programmes for peace education are being developed in privileged contexts (Bajaj, 2015), they might need to be reconfigured for effective application in settings of inequality, power imbalances and conflicting interests, in particular in situations of protracted violence. Studies investigating peace education in (post)conflict areas also demonstrate the need for adaptations in order to create durable transformations in communities (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009; Clarke-Habibi, 2005).

Considering the complex dynamics of violence and its impact on community life as described above, educating for peace in a violent context might however be full of ambiguities that should be taken into account. Circumstances in environments characterised by hostility and mistrust, might very well impose constraints on the opportunities to address issues of violence and peace. Das and Kleinman (2000) argue that violence in everyday life creates an interchange between emotional conditions and moral processes which produces and transforms both people's individual values and communal meaning-making. They propose that when violence is part of day-to-day living, it becomes central to the moral order and orients norms and normality. This might have important implications for peace education in these contexts, which presents caring and compassion as an alternative moral order.

Building on resistance theory (Abowitz, 2000), combined with the transformative perspective of peace education (Bajaj, 2015; Noddings, 2008), we argue that to design and implement peace educational programmes in violent contexts effectively, a critical understanding of the community context is vital. This paper aims to contribute to the existing knowledge on education for peace by exploring the perspectives of educators who both live and teach in Brazilian slums. Starting from their actual reality, we investigate teachers' perceptions of violence in their communities in relation to their educational goals and practices. While recognising Das et al. (2000) distinct dynamics of violence to analyse the contextual limitations for addressing issues of violence and peace, we use Abowitz's framework to consider the transformative potential of educational environments in a violent neighbourhood context. To reach this goal, our study was guided by three main research questions: 1) what is the educators' perception of the (violent) neighbourhood context?, 2) how do educators look at the school's mission and how is this related to their perception of the school-neighbourhood relationship?, and 3) what is the educational practice of in-school educators in response to violence in the neighbourhood context?

2. Study setting

Data collection took place in three community preschools located in slum areas of Salvador, state capital of Bahia in north-eastern Brazil with a population of nearly three million people in 2016 (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), 2016). Despite large improvements over the past decade, the metropolitan area of Salvador scores relatively low on educational outcomes (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2013). In 2018 still 12.7 percent of the population above 25 was illiterate and 28.2 percent did not complete primary school (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografie e Estatística (IBGE), 2018). Recommendations of The World Bank (2004) to improve the education system and reduce inequality levels in Brazil included continuing social assistance programmes linked to school attendance and enhanced access to preschool education for low-income families.

Many low-income families live in *favelas*, built on wasteland that was gradually urbanised and nowadays accommodates one third of Salvador's population; approximately one million people (Corso Pereira, 2008; Instituto Brasileiro de Geografie e Estatística (IBGE), 2017). Throughout Brazil, *favela* residents formed local community cooperatives to work on practical solutions to urgent problems that the government failed to address properly, such as basic infrastructure and day care initiatives (Almeida Cunha Filgueiras, 1994; Kramer, 2006). The latter developed into a common phenomenon as *crèches comunitárias*, that initially served as nurseries but gradually focused more on educational experiences. Many developed into preschools – some partially funded by public resources – which function as educational environments with a particular mission to address community issues.

One such pressing issue is violence. Violent death rates in Brazil are similar to or even higher than rates in conflict-affected countries (Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, 2015). In 2017 Salvador had a total rate of 50.6 intentional violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, an increase compared to preceding years and significantly higher than the average rate for state capitals (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública (FBSP), 2018). Violent offences and homicide in particular, occur most in the city's slum areas (Espinheira, 2001). Spatial analyses of homicides in Brazilian cities have demonstrated that homicide rates are two to three times higher in low-income neighbourhoods, in particular those dominated by armed groups of drug traffickers (Barcellos & Zaluar, 2014; Costa & Lima, 2018; Santos, Barcellos, Sá Carvalho, & Flôres, 2001). According to the Secretary of Public Security in Salvador approximately 70 percent of incidents involving excessive violence are related to rivalry between gangs or other drug related disputes (Conselho Nacional do Ministerio Público (CNMP), 2013).

3. Method

Data for this study was collected by the first author during 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2015 and 2016, which consisted of daily participation in three community preschools and several guest families, located in three different *favelas* of Salvador. Although the full data set includes various types of ethnographic data (e.g. field notes, photographs, recordings), in this paper we focus on semi-structured interviews with school staff conducted at the preschools. Examples of interview questions are listed in Table 1. Informed consent was obtained in all cases and the educators were informed about the study's purpose and their right to quit at any time.

Table 1
Examples of interview questions

PART A – Demographics
- Where were you born and where did you grow up?
- What is your family composition? Who do you share a house with?

PART B – Educational goals and practices
- What do you find important in the children's education?
- I would like to learn more about the values educators transmit to the children. With values I mean moral values, or fundamental ideals about what is important in life that give direction to people's behaviour. Which values do you find important in the children's education? Which values do you think are not important or wrong and would you prefer not to transmit to the children?
- Why do you find this value important/not important or wrong? Can you give an example of how you teach this value to the children? Do the children learn this value at other places than at school?
- What rules are there at school?
- Which type of behaviour do you try to encourage/discourage in the children? How do you encourage/discourage this behaviour?

PART C – Perception of home environment
- What are the similarities/differences between the school and the home environment?
- Do you talk with the parents about the education of the children?
- Do you visit the families at home?

PART D – Perception of neighbourhood environment
- How do you like living in this neighbourhood?
- What kind of behaviour do children learn in the streets?
- Which rules apply to the children in the streets?
- Which values in your opinion apply to the streets?
- Do you think the neighbourhood is a safe environment for the children? Why or why not?
- Does the presence of gangs in the streets affect the children in this neighbourhood? Does it impact the development of the children? If yes, in what way?
- Is the environment of the street different from the school environment? In what way?
- Is the environment of the street different from the home environment of the children? In what way?
- What kind of competences do educators need to educate children in this neighbourhood?

3.1. Participants

Interviewed school staff (n = 26) were employed as coordinating staff (n = 5), teachers (n = 16) and teachers' aides (n = 5). In the remainder of this paper we will refer to all participants as 'educators'. Despite the hierarchical distinction, they all had daily contact with pupils and their caregivers and played a significant role in the pupils' education, which was considered a team mission. Two of the three schools were founded by catholic churches.

The educators were between 21 and 60 years of age (mean = 44) and varied in educational background from high school to postgraduate degree. The vast majority were women (n = 23). Ten educators did not have children and the remaining sixteen had one to three children. Several educators raised their children as a single parent.

On average, the educators had been neighbourhood resident for over 30 years. Half of them were born and raised in the community (n = 13), while others grew up in different slum areas of Salvador or in rural areas nearby, but generally had been living in the community for over 20 years. Five educators were currently living outside the schools' neighbourhood, adjacent to (n = 1) or in other *favelas* (n = 4). Because the educators lived inside their schools' neighbourhood or in similar areas, they had experienced its context from various perspectives (e.g. as a resident, a parent, a child and an in-school educator), providing them with an insider's view with multifarious perspectives on educational issues in their neighbourhood.

3.2. Procedure

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Portuguese by the first author and four local research assistants. Transcripts were checked against the audio recordings for accuracy and entered into NVivo 11 for analysis. To ensure anonymity, (place-)names in transcript excerpts used in this paper are fictitious. A comprehensive process of thematic analysis was applied (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with the main analytical focus on the educators' perceptions of neighbourhood violence and their educational practices related to violence and peace. Themes addressed in participants' statements were identified and coded into categories. After analysis of seven interview transcripts a coding tree was developed and sequentially revised as succeeding transcripts were analysed. Themes were discussed among the three authors until consensus was established and were subsequently checked for consistency, distinctiveness and their validity in relation to the original dataset. Analysis of the interview data was directed at an improved understanding of the practical dilemmas involved in peace education in violent contexts and the opportunities for resistance to violence. Since the educators referred to the neighbourhood context whenever asked about their educational goals and practices, we conducted a three-step analysis, starting with the educators' perceptions of the neighbourhood environment, the family environment and the issue of violence. Secondly, their reflections on the school's mission and their educational goals in relation to the neighbourhood context are considered. As a final step, we show how the educators constructed an educational response to violence as a practical application of their mission. These three elements constituted the initial structure of the coding tree, further elaborated with subcategories and the connections between them as transcripts were thoroughly analysed. As an illustration of the coding tree, Table 2 displays an overview of the subcategories belonging to the educator's perception of the neighbourhood and family environment.

Table 2
Overview main theme 'Perception of neighbourhood and family environment' and subcategories ordered by number of references

Perception of neighbourhood	Perception of family
Culture of Violence	Irresponsible
Link Between Family and Gangs	Unstructured
Gang Violence	Main Influencer
Gang Supremacy	No Control
Worry and Distress	Ignorant or Resistant to School Value
Increasing Violence	No Loving Care and Attention
Street Cultural Neighbourhood Values	Struggle Hardships
Guns	Opposite to School Environment
Teaching Street-Gang Life	Poverty
Cultura do Ficar	Violence
Quarrels and Enmity	Harsh and Authoritarian
Rivalry	
Attention and Recognition	
Play in the Streets	
Retribution	
Appreciation for School Efforts	
Easy Money	
No Play Area	
School Under Attack by Gang Culture	
Distrust	
Many (Unused) Opportunities	

4. Results

4.1. The educators' perceptions of the neighbourhood context

4.1.1. Widespread violence

All educators described the neighbourhood environment as increasingly violent. In the first place they related the issue of violence to drug trafficking gangs and their confrontations with the police and rival factions. The risk of children getting caught up in drug use or traffic was considered the most dire threat within the community.[1] They mentioned that gang presence was omnipresent throughout the neighbourhood's streets and the homes of its residents. Two educators who worked in the same classroom described the inescapability of being confronted with gang life through familial connections:

Emanuela: Our neighbourhood is like that, so every house has a bit of it. Every home has a piece of it. And there's no way around it. Because when it's like that, there's a father who is [involved], there's a mother who is a [drug] user, and there you go.
Lea: There's an uncle, there's a brother, there's a nephew
Emanuela: There's always someone who ehr, is involved.

Most educators referred to the environment of the streets, the family homes and the wider community interchangeably when talking about violence, and emphasised their interconnectedness. They described how in the streets children learn violent behaviour from older youth and adults, mostly through a process of observation and imitation. However, they also referred to conflict and fights in family homes and the code of aggression parents instruct their children in. Many educators described such a mode of interaction as a 'culture of violence' which they lamentably observed to be very common in the community. As Vânia, a coordinator and former teacher stated:

These mothers find this a normal attitude. Resolving things with aggression, with attacking and knocking about. Because they were raised like that. (…) I consider it a question of family, I believe it is passed on from family to family, right, a family culture. And not all of them have that concern: "Gosh, my mother did this to me, and so I am going to try and give the best to my child, I am going to do it different with my child", not all of them have that concern.

Vânia perceived that within 'these' families aggression is the regular way of dealing with conflict, which is passed on from one generation to the other. Despite the distinction between mothers who continue the cycle and those who try to break it, most educators generally considered families, sometimes including their own, to be 'part of the problem' of violence in the community.

4.1.2. Disorganised families in a fearful community

Other aspects in the educators' neighbourhood descriptions were often interconnected to their perception of violence as dominating family and community life. For example, many educators spoke about the issue of 'disorganised families', referring to several characteristics of family life they considered problematic, such as single parenthood, a young age of conception and no structured daily schedule. Some educators associated such 'disorganisation' with gang involvement, since several of their pupils were growing up in broken families due to a parents' imprisonment or violent death. In general, many educators believed disorganised families failed to provide sufficient support and supervision to their children, which they subsequently related to children's aggressive misconduct and even gang participation.

Despite their disapproval of what they called their neighbourhood's *cultura de violência*, the educators also stressed that everyone was inevitably embroiled in it. This was most prominently exemplified by the sense of fear that violence created, affecting family life as well as extended community relations. They described how everyday risks of gun violence and gang recruitment caused great anxiety among residents, including themselves. This was clearly expressed by Joana:

Joana: You know what I observe? The children pick a biscuit, they take the biscuit and say it's a gun. It goes back to that same point: the environment they live in. Because they see this daily. The police, killing. Ehr, among *eles* right, one another, killing each other. And the children over there in the middle. It's mothers running [for cover], (…) even like this week, me and the director, we went here close by to the upper part[2], after some [pupils] from the project.
Interviewer: Ah to visit them at home?
Joana: Exactly. And we got scared by what we saw. And as you know, the majority is from here, from the school. Many of the parents were there that moment. (.)
Interviewer: And why did you get scared?
Joana: Police! Seizing, taking them, all with guns in their hands. And *eles* over there, *praticando*. You know. (.) It's complicated, right. Complicated. And so, they grow up seeing these things. What's the future of these children? Am I wrong? What's their future?

The fear Joana talks about is also manifested in the veiled terms referring to gang activity, which are standard in the community. For example, *eles,* literally translated as 'them', is commonly used to refer to gangs and *praticar* (to practice) means committing crime[3]. Besides the fear it induced, Joana explained how the visual presence of guns in the neighbourhood affected her pupils' behaviour in

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[1] Educators referred to both types of involvement in the drug scene interchangeably since users and traffickers are both entangled in gang activity. See Goldstein (2013) for an elaborate description of this issue.
[2] This part of the neighbourhood, located right next to the school, accommodated the poorest families and was considered extremely dangerous.
[3] See Penglase (2014) for an elaborate discussion of concealing language in *favelas*.

school. Her anxiety was therefore also related to her pupil's future, which she faced with a sense of desperation due to the dominating presence of gangs.

4.2. The schools' mission in the neighbourhood

4.2.1. Safe haven in a danger zone

Against the backdrop of an unsafe neighbourhood context, educators stressed the need for schools that provide protection from the harmful experiences and risks children are exposed to. They explicitly aimed to create a loving, providing and most of all secure environment where the children could be care-free and actually be 'a child'. They perceived the outside world as tough, inappropriate for children and lacking personal attention and they wanted to establish a different world inside the school. Vânia underlined this purpose in the following excerpt:

> So the teacher also needs to know how to interact with the child concerning this issue of affection, right, with care. (…) They need to be in a comfortable environment, sitting in a good chair. But it's even more important that they feel welcome, that they feel sheltered. And so we, in a certain way it's part of our competence because often they do not have this with their parents out there. They find it here, but not with the people whose duty it actually is: at home.

Vânia pointed out how the school functioned as a 'shelter' for the children by providing caring relations. Meanwhile she contrasted the school environment with the family environment. By emphasising the difference between them, the educators dissociated the school from the community. Such a figurative 'wall' – also materialised by high fences and iron gates – aimed to create a safe haven, closed off from the outside world.

4.2.2. The path towards a better future

Although the schools deliberately dissociated themselves from the neighbourhood, establishing a secluded safe zone, their objective was also to provide the community and its families with support. This is illustrated by Vânia:

> We have documents stating our goals, but I think that the strongest is to take care of the families in need, trying to really free them from *marginalidade*[4] . Because this project is directed at the child of today becoming a citizen in the future and they will need to have the belief that they can make a difference in this world. So we try to make them reflect, participate, make them see and in the future go and have an effect in the community.

In this fragment Vânia made explicit that the school – as one of the community organisation's projects – aimed to enable the families to move out of the margins of society. When reflecting on their institution's and personal goals, all educators focused on a better future for the children, which in their eyes meant finishing an education instead of getting involved in gangs and drugs. This aim was often mentioned before they were asked about the community context, indicating the central role it played in the schools' mission and demonstrating how educational goals were closely knit to the educators' perception of the community. This is exemplified by Norah's answer to an initial interview question:

> Interviewer: And what is your goal with the children? Here at the preschool?
> Norah: Seeing the children grow up and having a better future. You know. Because the violence is so big. Especially here in our neighbourhood, here in the outskirts. Every day you see, many, there have been youth who attended this preschool, children, who already died because of *as drogas*[5] . (.) And we don't want that for them, right. So I beg God all the time to show them something better. That we can show them, can help them find another path.

Besides expressing deep concern for her pupils, in this statement Norah also underlined the objective to guide them towards a better future, away from the violence. This mission was also visualised in a hallway poster, as shown in Fig. 1.

4.2.3. A culture of peace

The educators described this alternative path as a 'culture of peace'. When elaborating on their educational goals they highlighted a concept of love or respect, reflected in a set of interconnected values and a comprehensive mode of conduct they aimed to transmit: being kind and gentle, helpful and polite, empathetic and forgiving. Their ambition to form good citizens, who do not get involved in delinquency, was connected to their focus on these alternative moral values. Director Anselmo, stated his perspective as follows:

> At the start of the year we all gather to reflect on our aim, our mission. From there, we start our work. And we also speak about the values we want to pass on. The question of respect. Respect for the other. The responsibility, the engagement with the other. The question of taking care of the environment that we need to have. So it's more or less these basic principles. Not hurting the other. (…) [the objective] is to encourage a culture of peace. Say no to the violence and incite a culture of peace in the neighbourhood.

Anselmo presented the effort to instil a culture of peace in the children as a counterweight to the violence in the neighbourhood. He explained that by passing on values of care and respect to the children, the school worked towards a more peaceful community

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[4] *Marginalidade* is a diffuse concept in Brazil, often used to refer to poverty and delinquency altogether. *O marginal* is a synonym for the criminal or outlaw. According to www.dicionarioinformal.com.br *marginalidade* means "those who live in the margins of society and do not respect laws".
[5] '*As drogas*' literally means 'the drugs', but it is also used to refer to the 'world' surrounding it: gang life, drug traffic and drug using.

Fig. 1. A heart-shaped hallway poster, stating Proverbs 22:6:
"Teach a child the path she should walk and even when she's old, she will not depart from it"

environment. This was clearly considered a team effort, central to their collective mission. By presenting a different set of values in a secluded space, the in-school educators maintained their distance from the community, while simultaneously aiming to change the environment and therefore also engaging with it.

4.3. The educational response to a violent context

4.3.1. Care and order

The educators described many strategies to transmit a culture of peace to their pupils, such as songs and stories to teach them about right and wrong and explicitly modelling caring modes of interaction. An important everyday instrument were the *combinados* (classroom rules) that served as a guide to desired behaviour, such as helping each other, and undesired behaviour, such as fighting. Clarissa described how she dealt with aggression in her classroom:

> We already live in a time in which everything is violent, lots of fighting, many deaths, and they act upon these situations (…) And so I am always telling them not to beat their classmates, that they should call on me, not hit back. (…) I also explain about the issue of the 'magic words', which are necessary. I explain that when we pass by and do not say 'good morning', 'good afternoon', this affects people. That a simple 'good morning' can at a certain moment even help the person that is passing by. We need to be polite to live together, because the world today is really tough, so if we do not pass on the love to them, they will grow up in a world surrounded by bad feelings.

In this fragment Clarissa explicitly put forward the importance of advocating for thoughtfulness and amiability to compensate for the omnipresent violence, albeit through minor gestures like saying 'good morning'. While these 'magic words' might seem futile courtesies, many educators actually attached great importance to them as a powerful weapon in contesting violence in the neighbourhood.

The educators also stressed the importance of an orderly classroom and many *combinados* were directed at organisation, such as walking in line and cleaning up toys. Joana described why she found this important:

> For me it has to be like this: no chaos (…) When it's circle time, wait at the side until the teacher has arranged the circle. When it's time to enter the circle, you can't get up all at once, it will turn into a mess. So the right word is organisation. Let's <u>organise</u>. Organisation is like this, you get up one by one, only when the teacher tells you to. If I did not call your name, stay put. And so they will learn to have organisation in their own lives.

Like Joana, many educators believed that obeying a rather strict order and routine schedule was beneficial to the children, since it contributed to a predictable, calm and therefore secure and peaceful environment. Furthermore, Joana mentioned her pupils would adopt the order she imposed and would live by it in the future. The educators often contrasted the orderly and structured school environment which they considered important for creating peace, to disorganisation in the family environment, in their view an impediment to peace and harmony.

4.3.2. Voicing versus silencing

Establishing a peaceful environment was considered an arduous task, in particular since the issue of violence regularly entered the school walls in various forms. How the educators handled references to violence differed markedly according to circumstances. Children spoke relatively often about violence, for example during circle time. Taísa described how she responded to such situations:

Many [children], like for example this week, you saw that I let them talk, let them narrate and all, and it wasn't a very pleasant discourse, but we have to listen and accept it, right. And so I heard the story of "my dad beat up my mom, she took the scissors, the knife", and all that stuff. And so we have to impart to them that such a thing is not something I agree with, that it's not a good thing.

While Taísa stressed that educators should demonstrate their disapproval of violent behaviour, she also underlined the importance of listening to the children and let them voice their stories about domestic violence, even while she considered these 'unpleasant'. However, most educators advocated for a stringent containment of such stories when involving referral to gangs. Besides accounts of killings or arrests, this also involved children's pretend play, impersonating gang members or staging police raids. Anselmo explained that prohibition of such play was purposely administered school policy in response to violence in the neighbourhood:

The culture of violence and drug trafficking is really developing. And it's affecting the children. So much that inside the preschool we don't accept any type of toy, neither swords nor guns, because they were *brincando de arma*[6] <u>all the time</u>. So we prohibited it and do not accept it.

Banning this type of play was one element in a larger strategy of removing all references to the violent world outside the school walls. The educators explained that they aimed to make the children 'forget' about that part of their lives by creating an alternative, child-appropriate reality without swearing, accounts of gang disputes or any other expression associated with gang life or police violence.

This 'silencing' practice was thus directed at shielding the children from their neighbourhood reality, but for another part seemed linked to deliberately instructing them to keep quiet about gang-related issues. Two educators explained why they did not discuss these things with their pupils openly:

Emanuela: They come here already instructed: say nothing, do not talk about it, you know. And that's why we are like this (signs that hands are tied together). It's complicated.
Lea: And you even should not know that much, because who knows too much…
Emanuela: True. (laughs)
Lea: That happens because of knowing too much.
Interviewer: People prefer to?
Lea: Keep quiet.

Emanuela demonstrated that their hands were tied because of the 'see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil' practice in the community. As Emanuela and Lea clarified – albeit with few words – such a strategy in fact had an important function, because 'knowing too much' could have severe consequences. Silencing of references to gang violence seemed a strategy for peace, without breaking the community 'rules'. However, these community rules also imposed significant restrictions at times, for example on arithmetic instruction, as Viola explained:

To only say the number three-, number three is a damned faction in the neighbourhood. And so you cannot talk about it. And so if you know about some news – they killed so-and-so (…) and he's of that faction and he came from I don't know where – they invented this, a war. That means, you cannot say the number three, because it's the others, they're from the other neighbourhood. (…) And so that's the thing, even when we're counting in class, this number three you have to say it softly. I feel scared.

Viola explained her restraint in speaking the number three out loud, because it referred to a rivalling gang. Using certain language or symbols because they were associated with particular factions or gang life in general was considered problematic. Since the educators were also community residents, despite the limitations these rules posed to their teachings they also knew – and like Viola often feared – the consequences if not abiding by them.

4.3.3. Starting points of transformation

Being a community member had the advantage of knowing how to navigate through the contextual obstacles and limitations, but meanwhile incurred additional difficulties in the establishment of a culture of peace. Some educators voiced the idea that they too had acquired 'inappropriate' or harmful practices that were difficult to erase. Clarissa expressed that she struggled to adjust the communication style she was raised in:

Myself, I grew up based on yelling and shouting, so much that today I have a louder voice because of it (laughs). I grew up in an environment of yelling, that's why I never learned and I think there should be agreement, a conversation between parent and child.

Although Clarissa preferred a calm and dialogical communication style, she believed the argumentative style she 'inherited' affected the communication with her pupils. Many educators agreed that, because they were raised in the community, they were part of the practices they hoped to transform in the school. This was clearly stated by Vicki:

We try all the time to be a different [environment], although we also absorb much of the behaviour from [out] there. Because we

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[6] *Brincar de arma* was a broadly used verb by educators of all three schools to refer to pretend play involving guns.

have the moms inside the [school] space. And the teachers live <u>inside</u> the community. (…) And so we are in pursuit too, of trying to change ourselves in order to try to change these children (…). It's a daily struggle, so to say. We are working on this for it to change more and more. We cannot let the negative things win, right? Because we have a purpose here to do something important, something innovative that makes a change.

Although Vicki underlined that effectuating change and remodelling themselves was a 'struggle', she also demonstrated determination in their collective purpose to innovate and transform community patterns of behaviour. This was exemplified with the educators' stance regarding parents who instruct their children to retaliate if they got mistreated by classmates. Although many educators explained this attitude as a way to protect their children, they were also frustrated about these parents undermining their efforts to create more peaceful interaction in the classroom. In their opinion, parents should instruct their children to turn to an adult supervisor. Emanuela reflected on these different ways of conflict resolution:

I think they order them [to retaliate] so that they can defend themselves, but that's not the way. To strike back, "Go and hit back so that you won't get hurt again". (…) But for us that's not the same anymore, here [at school] we don't have this type of treatment, we don't have this type of view.

Emanuela showed understanding towards the parents' view on retaliation, but meanwhile contrasted their perspective with the educators' view which was 'not the same anymore' now that they were part of the school. Therefore, several educators believed the parents' perspective could alter as well. Joana gave a personal example of how she had changed her behaviour as a parent and how it inspired her to pass on her insights:

In my time, during my childhood, at the slightest provocation, I got smacked. (…) And I used to do the same thing with my kids. (…) Until that moment, when my sons (…) went to that school. And there, they gave these lectures, they were very important and they called my attention. Do you believe that after this lecture that I went to, I came home and I thought to myself: "my God, everything my kid does wrong, I go and beat him. I am not going to hit him anymore". (…) And so this school, it taught things that right now I am passing on to these families.

Just like the lecture Joana referred to, the educators provided information and advice in parental meetings and in individual conversations with parents, hoping to transform parenting practices they considered harmful for their efforts to establish a culture of peace.

Community practices could thus be perceived as a threat to a safe and peaceful school environment, but could also offer opportunities to transform elements of violence. A widely used medium to do so, was reverting acts of aggression and stories about violence through theatre play and songs. These techniques did not only provide the educators with the opportunity to discuss themes like friendship and helpfulness and to convey peaceful modes of interaction, but also gave them instruments to creatively deal with expressions of violence entering the classroom. Clarissa explained this as follows:

We have to be creative teachers in the classroom and bring their reality to them in a different shape, you know. There are slang songs that we try to transform into calm songs. When they arrive in the morning "Miss! They killed that guy", we should be talking to them and revert the situation. It's a question of us being a creative teacher and making a change in their reality. We are no superheroes who can change everything, but change as much as possible. And it's hard. Because when we see that whole classroom shooting around, "tra tra tra", we need something that changes this straight away, and from that instant we respond, wake up, do something!

When her pupils brought 'slang songs' that glamorise violence into her classroom, Clarissa used them as a starting point of transformation by introducing new, child-appropriate lyrics. She emphasised the need for such creative strategies to 'revert' expressions of gang violence into the complete opposite like a children's song. While not openly opposing the presence of gangs, she did present an alternative vocabulary, reconstructing symbols of gang violence into a manifestation of peace.

Similar to such a reconstruction of reality was the educators' ambition to transform their pupil's life courses. By offering alternative future prospects, the schools and other community projects were considered instruments for youth to resist gang life, as explained by Joana:

How many, thank God, are free of this. Because they found a place that took them in, right, who today, thank God, already have found their first job, already grew up in life and freed themselves from that. (…) So we need more environments, like the school, like the projects that bring them something different, something new, to pull them from this world that has nothing good to offer.

By providing children an alternative, the community schools were directed at countering the 'world' of drugs. As such, the schools' existence was considered a transformative practice in itself. Not by openly opposing or fighting the gangs, but by offering an alternative environment and withdrawing their potential personnel, 'pulling' children towards a culture of peace.

5. Discussion

This paper intended to provide insight into peace educational practices of educators living and teaching in violent neighbourhoods. Their educational practice was characterised by restrictions and partly focussed on maintaining an orderly structure and strict rules for the containment of violence. In line with Das et al. (2000) reflections on how violence creates an ecology of fear that inhibits agency and dictates social life, the educators shunned the topic of gang violence and banned any referrals to it. In doing so, they

created an alternative child-appropriate environment, meanwhile teaching their pupils to adhere to the community rules to stay safe. Similar processes of 'silencing', denial and moving attention away from what is intimidating have been indicated as frequently used coping practices in contexts of violence (Lawrence, 2000). Whether to avoid reprisals or to cover 'trauma that is beyond language' (Lawrence, 2000, p.192), silence is often considered a form of protection. While restrictive measures and keeping quiet seem to be adaptive coping mechanisms to preserve physical safety when people feel trapped between warring parties, they also might maintain the status quo.

However, within this limited playing field the educators constructed several strategies to oppose the 'culture of violence'. They focused on educating kindness, politeness and caring modes of interaction by providing their pupils with a non-violent repertoire, as elements of an alternative culture of peace. Despite the difficulties in addressing gang violence, the educators developed implicit ways to do so, making use of several 'loopholes' in the law of a violent context. Diverting the attention away from violence and aggression, their practices might be considered a manifestation of Penglase's (2014) 'tactics' to evade the obstacles presented by the neighbourhood's insecurity. However, we argue that their strategies exceed the level of coping with violent circumstances and actually can be considered a form of resistance, creating possibilities for transformation in an environment that is dictated by violence.

Without openly confronting the existing power relations in the neighbourhood, the educators aimed to establish a peaceful school environment and a safe haven for their pupils, creating an obvious interruption within the violent community context. Although to a certain extent they constructed a fortified space, isolated from the outside world, the school and neighbourhood environment were not strictly separated, since engaging with the families was a deliberate part of the schools' mission and staff came from the community. While this presented significant challenges because the educators were trying not just to educate their pupils in a different moral order but also tried to liberate themselves from inherited practices, it also provided them with the ability to find and make use of the loopholes in the community rules. The schools' efforts to create a secured and child-friendly physical space while involving the local community are in line with policy recommendations for protecting educational environments in contexts of violence (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2014, 2016). While current programmes mostly focus on soliciting advice and support from communities, our results stress the need for a more profound community engagement in order not to overlook violence-related dynamics and the limitations for community agency it generates. Notwithstanding the difficulties, resistance from within might be the only way to achieve a sustainable change in the neighbourhood context and disrupt violence's dominant order.

Through implicit practices to resist violence and an explicit mission to create a culture of peace, the educators orchestrated transformation in the community, directed by alternative future prospects through a route of education and care. While not openly discussing the issue of gang violence, they did oppose their presence, rejecting their lifestyle of crime and violence by presenting an alternative moral order. Apparently merely avoiding to challenge existing power relations, they actually constructed a comprehensive counteroffensive towards gang violence, working towards peace while staying within the boundaries of safety. Their strategies might contribute to indirect models of peace education in conflict areas affected by protracted violence, where conditions do not allow direct reference to the conflict (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009).

6. Conclusion: towards community-informed peace education

Opportunities for resistance to violence might not be discovered without having full understanding of the neighbourhood reality. We argue that because of the educators' community perspective, their normative practice was fundamentally guided by the distinct logic violence produces, while it simultaneously enabled them to create alternate routes to navigate the context and achieve their educational goals. Our results suggest that these practices are not only directed at managing risks, but also at creating opportunities to introduce alternative moral teachings and transform the moral order in violent contexts. As such, the schools and their expressed hope for transformation by educating peace can therefore be interpreted as an act of *resistance* according to Abowitz's (2000) framework.

However, the restrictions educators experienced in debating gang violence and the discretion of their implicit transformative practices underline the difficulties in questioning dominant practices and working towards systemic change in educational environments involved in dynamics of insecurity and fear. While the educators created a safe haven inside the school and found several loopholes for transformation towards peace, possibilities for achieving fundamental change in the neighbourhoods' situation were severely limited by the contextual risks. Although the community schools adopted a distinct profile as a nonviolent space, they also circumvented the thorny issue of gang-related violence in an emotionally charged context where 'every home has a piece of it'. This raises the question what kind of transformation could be realised if these schools were enabled to expand their current safe zone and forge alliances for peace with kindred spirits. Through their engagement with the community, they might provide new opportunities for community building in the face of hampered community organisation due to neighbourhood violence (Perlman, 2010).

This study provides important insights on protection and violence in relation to community notions of order and communication, as well as the limitations of community agency. Based on our analysis, we argue that peace education in violent contexts has to seek practices that take into account the actual risks people are exposed to, before designing strategies to transform existing patterns into new ones. Our results show that in circumstances of everyday violence, educators considered strict order and control a necessary precondition for a peaceful environment. They combined a restrictive approach directed at the containment of violence with elements of Noddings' (2012) 'ethic of care' in their education for peace. Their educational practice might be considered an adaptive transformational approach and a bottom-up curriculum of peace education in a violent context. When genuinely considering local meanings and experiences, we encounter inventive practices that serve as subtle acts of resistance to violence and create an opening to work towards peace. Since community schools offer a potential transitional space in violent neighbourhoods, strengthening and expanding their educational practice and community approach might play a key role in designing solutions for the presented

contextual restraints and constructing hopeful perspectives. Building on Freire (2014); Noddings (2008) and Bajaj (2008, 2015) we recommend peace educational programmes to connect to the social reality of communities affected by violence, by remaining attentive to contextual limitations and making use of alternate routes offered by local community practices to work towards social change and build peace.

7. Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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