



Space, Place and Memories: Life Narratives About the Constitution of Subjects as Transforming Agents in the Periphery of São Paulo in Brazil

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Abstract

This article addresses the issue of the production of space in rural and urban territories and the dialectical relation with agency and environmental activism. The data came from a collective ethnographic action research conducted at the Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru and its surroundings in the periphery of São Paulo in Brazil. In this article, I analyse the narratives which are part of interviews with a primary teacher and a community leader, one responsible for the Green Unified Educational Centre Project and the other for the vegetable garden of Vila Nova Esperança. Both subjects have become environmental agents or transformative activists. I inquire if this has to do with their memories of places and their importance of such memories for their praxis and personalities and asked about their rural past or another situation which may have produced their environmental awareness. Focusing on concepts such as production of space, place as a lived and felt space, and *perezhivanie*, I analyse the dynamics of transformations through these narrative interviews.

Keywords: *production of space, place, memory, life narratives, rural/urban, perezhivanie*

Introduction

During the presentation of the research project to a group of primary school teachers, one of them asked the following question: “*If I plant a tree with a student today, will he remember it when he's an adult?*” It was Antonio who founded the Green Unified Educational Centre Project, which will be further explained later. In a village close to the Educational Centre where the research is being carried out, Lia, a resident, led a movement for the creation of a community vegetable garden and kitchen that would serve the local population, as well as other initiatives, such as a children’s library. Both individuals were interviewed as part of the activities of the collective action research that is being held at the Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru, one of the 58 Unified Educational Centres in the city of São Paulo, Brazil.

Unified Educational Centres have been an important inter-sectorial public policy in São Paulo involving the municipal departments of Education, Culture, and Sport and Leisure. This policy has been maintained throughout different municipal administrations since 2003. They are based on educational ideas of important Brazilian educators, writers and politicians, such as Mario de Andrade, Anísio Teixeira, Paulo Freire, and Darcy Ribeiro. In addition, they draw from previous initiatives, such as the Integrated Public Education Centres in Rio de Janeiro, the Comprehensive Childcare Centres nationwide, the Model Schools in Bahia, and the Centre for the Development of Urban and Community Equipment in São Paulo.

According to Perez (2010), Unified Educational Centres must be a combination of school, cultural, sports and leisure centres, to expand social protection networks for children and adolescents,

and to propose spaces for “the rescue of our human condition” (p. 288). The principles in all the projects are “(1) popular participation as a factor for change; (2) relationship between school and territory; and (3) culture as a link between education and territory” (Perez, 2007, p. 127). Several studies on the effects of Unified Educational Centres consider that they play an important part in the rearrangement of the urban fabric, as they aim to promote public areas in the city periphery to reduce criminality and social, cultural, technological, and educational exclusion (Oliveira, 2017; Padilha & Silva, 2004).

This research aims to analyse Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru as part of this educational public policy, the production of its space, the impact of its architecture, and the ways that surrounding communities signify it. The research team is divided into three subgroups: memory and education, architecture, and environment.

Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru is located on the western edge of the city, and it was built and implemented (2008–2009) during a right-wing administration, with the original design modified and the average area reduced to minimise budget costs. It sits on the edge of a stream, on a marshy area in a valley floor. It serves a population in high social vulnerability and sub-standard housing conditions.

There are four buildings at this Unified Educational Centre: a schooling block (with a nursery, a preschool, and primary and elementary schools; see Figure 1); a cultural block (with a multipurpose room, an industrial kitchen, and a library; see Figure 2); a management block (with offices and a meeting room; see Figure 2); and a sports and cultural block (with courts, a theatre, and multipurpose rooms). In addition, there are swimming pools (see Figure 2), a playground, and gym equipment. Despite the variety of facilities and equipment, there are several problems concerning their conditions, use and conservation. The swimming pools, for example, could not be used in 2023 because of structural problems.

Figure 1: The Schooling Block and Part of Uirapuru Community on the Right



Note: All photos in this article are part of the research group’s collection.

¹ All quotations, in particular those of Freire (1983), Perez (2007, 2010), Andrade (2010), Haesbaert (2011), Halbwachs (1990), Nery et al. (2019), Santos (2020, 2021) and Gomes and Ximenes (2022) have been translated into English for this article.

Figure 2: The Cultural Block, Management Block, and Area of Swimming Pool

For a megalopolis like São Paulo, with a population of almost 11.5 million and a high urban heterogeneity, an analysis developed by Nery et al. (2019) proposes a division into eight different urban patterns (each denominated by a letter: A to H), using a range of indicators: environmental, housing, health and hygiene conditions, urban mobility, crime patterns and population profile. The region where Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru is located belongs to Group H which is a peri-urban area and

has the second highest number of sectors with geological risk areas (18.4%) and the worst water, sewage, and rubbish collection rates (96.6%, 99.9% and 99.3%, respectively). ... The sectors in Group H are located beyond the city's suburbs, a space where urban and rural activities mix, making it difficult to determine the physical and social boundaries of both. (Nery et al., 2019, p. 27)

The observation of educational practices, as well as considerations made possible by the interviews, led me to write this article for the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, and to collaborate with the Special Issue *Considering diversity in educational research exploring school-community relationships*. I agree with the organisers of a previous issue, *Connecting Rural and Urban Education Research* (Fuqua et al., 2021), on the need to move beyond the “existing notions of a rural-urban divide” in search of “connections between the rural and the urban” (p. i) in educational studies.

Before moving on to the other sections of this article, I would like to bring the perspective of diversity into my discussion. Abramowicz et al. (2011) warn of the need to pay attention to the concepts of difference and diversity, which are often used interchangeably in Brazilian research publications. According to the authors, this undifferentiation hides social inequalities under the “aegis of tolerance” (p. 91). They stress the importance of educational research considering diversity and difference, recognising that there are “irreconcilable inequalities” (p. 94) and that a “pedagogy of the intolerable” (p. 96) is necessary. In this sense, Gomes and Ximenes (2022) point out that principles “such as equality, justice, equity, non-discrimination and non-violence ... are part of a democratic education project, with social quality, that recognizes diversity and stands against any form of inequality and discrimination” (p. 1).

In the territory of Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru and its surrounding communities, the diversity is present in many senses: race, ethnicity, nationality, origin within Brazilian territory, socio-economic and educational level, religion, and so on. Many activities developed within the facility and proposed by the schools’ political pedagogical projects as well as the research activities concern such diversity, are seeking to achieve a more democratic education and to contribute to social justice.

Space, Place, Territory, Memory and Subjectivity

In this section, I discuss the importance of concepts such as space, place, and territory to the understanding the constitution of subjects as transforming agents. Haesbaert (2011) calls attention to the spatial dimension on the construction of social processes. Based on the ideas of Lefebvre (2006), he states that every identity is spatial, since it is not performed in an abstract way, but is contextualised in space-time, geographically, historically, and symbolically perceived/lived. In the process of this study, the research team has dealt with memories of Unified Educational Centre and communities' agents, and has tried to understand how they compose daily life and relationships with the place and with each other, in a reciprocal dynamic. Specifically, it considers that these subjects/agents produce space, instead of conceiving them as customers.

Lefebvre (2006), influenced by Marx, prefers the category *production of space*, more concrete and dialectical, instead of *science of space*, in a particular historical-social formation (Damiani, 2012; Santos, 2020). Haesbaert (2011) distinguishes space and territory, based on Raffestin (1980). According to the latter, territory rests on space; it is a production from space, which differs slightly from Lefebvre's point of view, where the very space is produced. On the notion of territory, Haesbaert defines that "*besides the focus being put on one of the fundamental dimensions of the space, its political dimension of power relations, we could not admit its existence without the 'moment' of materialization through some type of spatial practice*" (p. 50). Santos (2020) states that "*space includes, therefore, this 'materialistic connection of a human being with another one' as told by Marx and Engels in The German Ideology*" (p. 321).

The concept of space in geography has been re-dimensioned, involving not only the physical, but also the social dimension, considering place as *lived and felt space* (Tuan, 1983). Thus, place can be understood as an appropriate, meaningful space with which people identify themselves. They are places of experience and places of everyday life (Carlos, 2007).

The lived experience creates, dialectally, our memory. Halbwachs (1990) relates the perception and experience of groups in space to the configuration of collective memory. For him, it is the individual as a member of groups that remains subject to the materiality of things and places, and memories of places that no longer exist can hold a group together. Space configures the most stable frameworks of a group's memory: "*there is no collective memory that does not develop within a spatial framework. ... We can say that there is no group, no genre of collective activity, that has no relation to a place*" (Halbwachs, 1990, p. 143). Bosi (1994), based on Halbwachs, analysed memories of elders in São Paulo in the 20th century, situating them within the collective memory of that period. One of the highlighted aspects is space: how their memories are permeated by references to their childhood house, the backyard, the street, biographical objects, the school, and a factory. These are aspects that populate memory and, at the same time, are elements for the constitution of identity.

Pollak (1992) reflects on memory and social identity and their relationship with events, people and places in the lives of individuals as social beings. According to him, the constitutive elements of both individual and collective memory are events (those experienced personally, lived by the groups to which the subjects belong, and all the events that occurred within the space-time of the person or group), people encountered during life directly or indirectly, and places.

In this regard, I think about the meanings and senses of places, people, objects, and words, which are all part of the social relations involved in the processes of belonging to living spaces – places – of subjects/agents. Vigotski² (2010) calls *perezhivanie* the dimension of the environment's influence on each person, particular in the sense that each person is dialectically individual and

² The surname of the author has different spelling in English (Vygotsky), Portuguese (most of the cases, Vigotski) and Spanish (Vyotski). I keep the spelling of the original texts for this article.

social in their concrete reality, according to the author's historical dialectical materialism roots. In Portuguese, the translation for the term is *vivência*. In English there is no specific word for *perezhivanie* and it is sometimes translated as *emotional experience* to differentiate from *experience*, which in Russian is *opit* and in Portuguese, *experiência*. Most of the time, texts in English use the Russian term *perezhivanie*. For different understandings and polemics around this concept, see Smolka et al. (2023).

Veresov and Fler (2016) draw attention to the relation between this concept and the one of a social situation of development, a dynamic and unique unity of child and environment. They refer to Vygotsky's consideration that the child is part of the social situation and that the relationship between child and environment occurs through the child's own experience. They point to the need

to study perezhivanie as (a) a prism that refracts certain aspects of the social environment and therefore to identify which aspects of the social environment influence the course of child development, and how they were refracted; (b) a unique unit of individual and environmental components of a certain concrete unique social situation of development, which is the initial moment that defines the future trajectories of the development of higher mental functions; and (c) a unit of consciousness, as a developing whole where changes of a child's concrete perezhivaniya bring dynamic changes to the whole organization of consciousness. (pp. 8–9)

Pino (2010), commenting on Vygotsky's concept, emphasises that the natural environment is also social. This is the so-called social environment where dialectics between nature and culture are considered. He also draws attention to another idea present in Vygotsky's text: the constant and reciprocal changes in environment, context, and the child/person.

Methods for a Qualitative and Collaborative Research

This research is based on the theoretical-methodological principles of a cultural-historical perspective on human development (Vigotski, 1996) and an enunciative and discursive approach (Bakhtin, 2017). It has adopted a qualitative, ethnographic, collaborative, and action research approach. A study has been carried out since 2022, in which attention has been paid to the micro-processes involved in the subjects' actions, meanings attributed to places, and experiences, aiming at emancipating and critically reflexive practices.

This approach is in line with Paulo Freire's principles of liberating and transforming education. According to Freire, everyone is "a critical agent in the act of knowing" (Freire & Shor, 1996, p. 46). In this sense, each subject/agent in the researched context is seen as a partner in the investigation process.

The research procedures include participant observation, socio-environmental/affective mapping, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews. The latter are considered a form of social interaction, a discursive, contextualised, and comprehensive practice (Silverman, 2000; Zago, 2003) and special attention is paid to life and experience narratives (Bertaux, 2010). McAlpine (2016) explains that:

Using a narrative methodology, particularly longitudinally with a relatively large number of individuals, enables us to document variable and shifting ways of understanding experience, both within and between individuals. Finally, since multiple views on experience can coexist as part of the narrative research report, we would argue it is possible to provide a richer and more plausible representation of lived experience. (p. 40)

McAlpine's (2016) words lead us again to the importance of diversity, which I link to the principles of "equality, justice, equity, non-discrimination and non-violence" (Gomes & Ximenes, 2022, p. 1). In 2023, themes of anti-racist education and ethnic diversity were focused during meetings for

teacher education with the research team and in planning pedagogical practices, as well as in the observation of local reality and selecting the interviewees, many of whom were migrants or their descendants.

Research Data

The research data are composed of a) field-diary accounts from participants' observations in Unified Educational Centre environments, such as daily life in schools, meetings with teachers, and management councils; b) documents including pictures and other documents about the history of the equipment and its surroundings, architectural designs, and political pedagogical projects; c) interviews with teachers (and also conducted by them), people who have actively participated in the history of the Unified Educational Centre, residents of the surrounding communities, professionals and other agents; and d) a socio-environmental/affective mapping of the territory.

Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru and the surrounding neighbourhoods present a series of problems, such as poverty, poor sanitation and housing, violence, problems with the buildings' infrastructure (lack of thermal and acoustic isolation), difficulties involved in sharing environments between schools and communities such as courts, the lack of a playground in one of the schools, and problems concerning teaching teams and students or their families. Nevertheless, the research team could observe important actions implemented by many of the agents and these have been analysed.

In this article, I focus on narratives from two interviews based on a script approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Federal Institute of São Paulo, process number 55508222.8.0000.5473, and conducted by the author: one with a primary school teacher of Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru and the other with a community leader from the area. Both interviewees authorised the publication and use of their names. The first interviewee is Antonio, the teacher, who has a rural past, as I expected. The other one, Lia, the community leader, does not. I analyse these narratives in the next sections, bringing to the discussion some theoretical aspects in a dialectical dynamic, highlighting the issue of the transformation of both subjects into *rural urban* agents. Their stories allow us to point out how one of them has turned his rural past into the present and the other has *ruralled* (Fuqua et al., 2021).

Narratives 1 and 2: Rural Past and “Rurban” Present

Antonio Marcos de Lima, born in Vicentina, Mato Grosso do Sul, has always enjoyed working with the land. He came with his family to São Paulo when he was a small child, “*in search of better living conditions, like the vast majority of people who came here.*” His father (from Bahia) was a carpenter, and his mother (from Sergipe) was a cleaner (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Brazil's Political Map.

Note: Three states are labelled: São Paulo; Mato Grosso do Sul and Bahia, where the interviewees Antonio and Lia were born, and Bahia and Sergipe, where Antonio's parents were born.

Narrative 1 is about Antonio's childhood in Carapicuíba (metropolitan region of São Paulo).

Interviewer: You told me that you had a childhood very connected to nature there. What was that like?

Antonio: At the time I came to Carapicuíba, it was rural. There were lots of ranches, farms, springs, and everything else. And over time, it changed and ended up turning into the rubbish it is today, which would be a [pause] dormitory town. With almost no sidewalk So it's a very [hesitant] precarious town. ...

Interviewer: But in your childhood days?

Antonio: It was very good. There were no paved streets, it was muddy, but it was very pleasant, very good to live in. Nowadays it's just houses and asphalt.

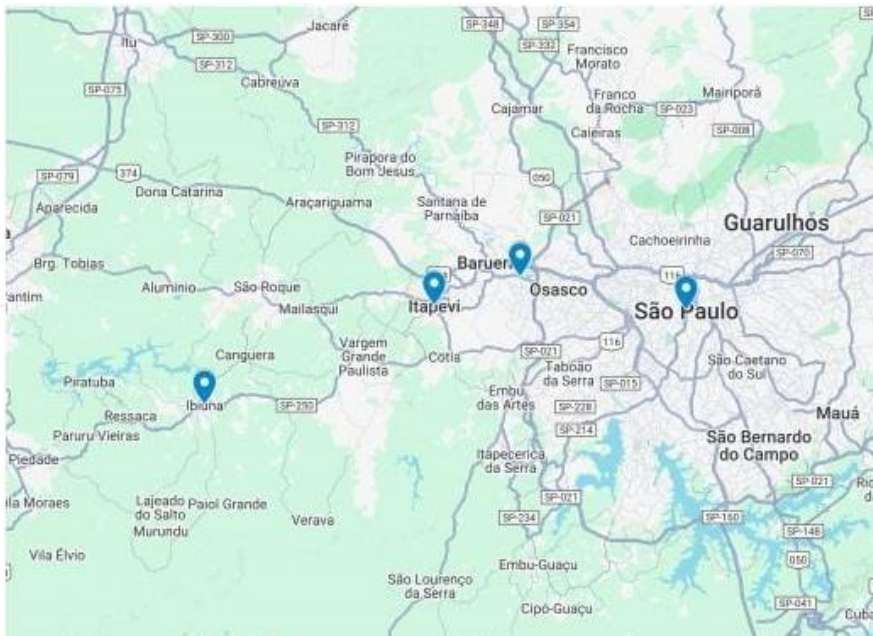
Interviewer: And do you have any memories to tell us about your childhood there, with nature?

Antonio: Nature was walking barefoot, bathing in the river, drinking spring water, eating fruit off the tree. ... All the things we must have nowadays.

Interviewer: Yes. The other day you told us that you want to give these [CEU] children what they can't have, right? In this childhood.

Antonio: Yes. Making it possible that the school can give these children this experience that they no longer have, right? They no longer have it because of the precariousness we see in families. Precarious housing and leisure. ... But the school can offer them, despite the small space we have here, this green reality and the possibility of experiencing things that they don't get to experience anymore, which is simply eating fruit off the tree, being able to climb a tree.

Figure 4: City of São Paulo and the Towns of Carapicuíba (Between Osasco and Barueri), Itapevi and Ibiúna (Google Maps, 2023)



Narrative 2 is about moving to Itapevi (metropolitan region of São Paulo) and Antonio's small farm in Ibiúna (metropolitan region of Sorocaba-SP). See Figure 4.

Interviewer: And you commented that before [hesitant] there were no green areas, but then there started to be a change, it seems like the construction of a park, right?

Antonio: Yes, Itapevi [hesitant] it seems [hesitant] I even wrote to the Town Hall [hesitant] and put the title [of the message] "Town without a park." Then there was a reply saying that they were developing linear park projects, because there was no more space to build parks. And now it seems that this was true because they've created a town park. ... It's a very large area, it doesn't have much greenery, but they're starting to green it up ... and it's creating a huge lake.

Interviewer: Antonio, ... you have a small farm in Ibiúna, right?

Antonio: Aha [hesitant]

Interviewer: And what's it like there? Tell us about it. What have you been planting there, cultivating there?

Antonio: It used to be a green area, a green belt, ... and there's a lot of vegetables, but they use a lot of agrochemicals.

Interviewer: Um [hesitant]

Antonio: And these pesticides have really damaged the soil. So, I'm trying to correct the soil. [hesitant] Because my area used to be planted with eucalyptus. And eucalyptus, I don't know if it acidified the soil and depleted it of nutrients. So now I'm correcting the soil, cutting down the undergrowth, letting the undergrowth settle, rotting, right? And planting [native] trees so that I can reforest that part of the land that belongs to me.

Interviewer: ... Do you go there on the weekends?

Antonio: Every weekend I go and work there, when I can. ...It's a rural area. If you look from where I live, you can see a very large plantation of cauliflower ... rosemary, cabbage, lettuce.

... There's a great diversity, of birds, you can find sandpipers, toucans, white wings, teiú [and so on] there are lots of snakes.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Antonio: Sagui, there are lots. ... There's a great diversity of animals.

Interviewer: Oh! There must be fireflies at night.

Antonio: Yes, and you can identify constellations too.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Antonio: You can identify Orion, Pleiades, I think [hesitant]

Interviewer: because there's very little electric light.

Antonio: Small Magellanic Cloud, Large Magellanic Cloud. [Hesitant] Some planets, you can identify their light too.

Interviewer: How beautiful!

Antonio: It's very nice, at night you can see a really starry sky.

The rural exodus or emptying the countryside is part of a Brazilian reality that increased with industrialisation, and intensified between 1970 and 1980, when more than half the population moved to cities in an emigration movement. Many families came to São Paulo, or other large cities, in search of better living conditions, and faced a very different reality from the one they expected to find. Many people were unable to continue in their original professions, becoming factory workers and/or cleaners, earning minimum wages.

Despite the hardships, in his narratives Antonio splits his life into two parts: 1) a happy childhood in the midst of nature (*“enjoying the springs, walking barefoot”*) in Carapicuíba, which he calls *“rural,”* and 2) other periods marked by degraded places, in which the towns became urban (*“almost no sidewalks, precarious, only houses and asphalt, a dormitory city”*—Carapicuíba—and a *“town without a park”* – Itapevi). Andrade (2010) explains that:

The contrasts between the countryside and the city are disappearing as transport and communication facilities allow the countryside to penetrate more and more into the city and the city more and more into the countryside. It can be said that there is a process of urban ruralisation and, conversely, rural urbanisation. Hence the sociologist-anthropologist Gilberto Freyre using the term “rurban” to define what has not yet ceased to be rural but is not yet urban. (p. 12)

Andrade (2010) goes on to say that:

In fact, with the development of capitalism and the ease of transport, people with higher income who live in the city have started to acquire land in the vicinity of the city ... At the same time, as urbanisation is expanding into rural areas, it is also spreading to the outskirts of cities, forming large housing estates for low-income people in areas where there are still some agricultural activities that benefit from the proximity of the urban market. These, however, are gradually being destroyed in the face of urban pressure and rising land prices. (pp. 12–13)

These clusters are typical of the various communities that surround CEU Uirapuru. Even though Antonio does not live in one of them, Itapevi is located on an underprivileged area in Greater São Paulo, which has about 21 million inhabitants, while the city of São Paulo has about 11.5 million inhabitants. In Antonio's narratives, he tells us about the degradation of space which turns out to be the production of space characteristic of capitalism. The lack of green areas, the

indiscriminate use of agrochemicals, the pavement with asphalt, the transformation of rural space that “ended up turning into the rubbish,” the existence of dormitory towns around São Paulo, like the one reported by Antonio, are part of a concrete geography of space linked to “a sociology of space and a history of space, in which the weight and pressure of history are dehumanising” (Damiani, 2012, p. 262).

Antonio’s memories of having lived in a rural area and closer to nature—“walking barefoot, bathing in the river, drinking spring water, eating fruit off the tree” (Narrative 1)—seem to shape his identity. These memories seem more linked to space than to chronological time. Pollak (1992) explains that “there are places of memory, places particularly linked to a memory, which may be a personal memory, but may also have no support in the chronological time” (p. 202). These places that no longer exist, linked to collective memory of family (Halbwachs, 1990), hold Antonio’s activity at Green Unified Educational Centre Project.

Antonio’s memories are supported by places—these lived and felt spaces (Tuan, 1983), places of experience (Carlos, 2007)—and so is his identity. Buying the small farm in Ibiúna, to which he travels on the weekends, seems to have been a way of reconnecting with this lost paradise (“It’s a rural area”) where he can plant, be close to animals, and enjoy the stars.

Narratives 3 and 4: Agency, Activism, and Environmental Education

In Narrative 3, Antonio tells us about Green Unified Educational Centre (CEU Verde). This is an after-school project that was born out of the observation of the socio-environmental conditions of Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru and surrounding areas. Another teacher from an elementary school, Fabiano, collaborated with the project for four years. Now there are two technical education assistants: Carlos and Beatriz. Around 1,000 trees have been planted, and today there are around 600 trees standing.

Interviewer: Where did the idea for Green Unified Educational Centre come from?

Antonio: It came from seeing the lack of greenery, you know? A school that houses over a thousand children. ... So I realised the children wouldn’t have a favourable environment in which to live out their childhood experiences. In this case, climbing a tree, having a picnic under a tree, eating fruit, picking from their own trees. And the CEU itself, when I started to realise this, was very arid, very hot. If you needed a shade, you had to stand under a wall. Artificial shades, so to speak. And I proposed – to myself, not to anyone else – that I would change this environment through a project. And I started doing the project on my own, out of my own pocket. I didn’t have much support. ... These are words you hear a lot: “Oh, put it on the list, then we’ll see!” ... I started buying trees. ... Then I joined the More Education Program [The Ministry of Education’s strategy for extending public school days to 7 hours] and started encouraging students to take part. ... They [municipality workers] came ... cut down, damaged more than 50 trees, ... then it was a very big fight, they called the Green Department. ...

Interviewer: That was at the end of last year, right?

Antonio: They replaced 30 of the 50 or so trees ... to finish afforesting the outside. This year we’ve completed tree-planting on the inside (see Figures 5 and 6) ... So next year we’ll complete the internal and external afforestation of the school. The next step would be creating a sensory garden. ... We also have a bird-watching project, the orchard, which is for children picking fruit, native or not, inside the school and outside the school, which would benefit our external and internal community. In this case, children could eat ... [many] types of fruit, make juice [hesitant] work on healthy eating [hesitant] recipes and everything else. So that’s the aim of the Green CEU: to give quality of life to both our school community and the external community, the surrounding area. ...

Interviewer: Is Green Unified Educational Centre ten years old?

Antonio: ... I think it was in 2010, when I came here, I started observing, right? There are even photos you can see it was an ugly place. Very ugly, dry, arid. I think it represented, externalised, what was in people's hearts, because people passed by and didn't see these things, they lived at school and didn't realise this need.

Interviewer: What a thing!

Antonio: It's a look that didn't exist. People went in and out of CEU (Unified Educational Centre) and nothing ever changed. I think people were even afraid to do that, because when I started, they said: "No, the structure, the format, of CEU can't be changed. What was done, the way it was done, has to remain." And I think that's wrong. A school needs to be green.

Figure 5: Antonio Observing Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru from a distance



Note: Antonio is near the temporary parking lot, by the stream, and where trees would be planted to help hold back erosion.

Figure 6: CEU's Open Area



Note: Antonio, Carlos and students who participate in Green CEU Project preparing the soil and planting trees in the central flowerbed, while residents cross CEU's open area.

In Narrative 4, Lia talks about the community vegetable garden. She tells us about becoming a community leader and developing a project for environmental protection and education. In 2013, she started the popular vegetable garden, an initiative that culminated with the creation of the Lia Esperança Institute, which also distributes 120 lunches a day to children in the community. Those involved in the project voted on the name. Today, the institute receives financial support

from the municipal administration and from a Canadian foundation [The Caring Family Foundation] that works to combat child poverty, domestic violence and deforestation. In addition, Lia told us that she began to identify herself as Lia Esperança (Lia Hope) after being asked at a Public Hearing where she came from.

Lia: My name is Maria de Lourdes Andrade Silva, but everyone knows me as Lia Esperança. I was born in a town ... called Itaberaba, in Bahia.

Interviewer: And do you have any references from the countryside? How did you learn to enjoy working with the land?

Lia: So, I learnt in Vila Nova Esperança because [hesitant] What happened was that I came to live here in 2003. In 2006, I found out that there was legal action to remove all the families. And I had bought the land and as soon as I started building my house, I found out that I had to leave, that everyone was going to be removed. And when it came to removing everyone, I said: "Wow, the only money I had I spent here. Am I going to lose everything like this?" And in 2006, I started researching to find out why the families were being removed. I discovered that they [the Courts] wanted to remove them [the families] because, according to them, people who lived here were degrading the environment. ...

And then what happens? ... I didn't understand because I didn't know. I never even cared about the environment. Do you know when you care about earning money and working? I would leave in the morning, go to work, come home in the evening. [hesitant] I didn't care. For me, I was living, I had food, I had the things I needed, right? Then I found out that we were in an environmental conservation area and that the Courts wanted to remove us because of that. But I also looked at it like this and thought: "Wow, what a context, what a contradiction! How are you going to get nature out of nature?"

Interviewer: Yes.

Lia: That's when I said: "No. It's wrong." Then, in 2009, it got worse. Then people said: "Lia, you have to be the leader here" Then I started taking part in meetings with prosecutors from the Environmental Prosecutor's Office. Then I began to understand what was going on. Then I said: "Prosecutor, why? Instead of removing those people from there, from that space, who have been living there for years, since before the environmental law, why not bring environmental education?" He didn't listen. ... "You don't have to take people out of the woods. You have to teach these people to live in harmony with the woods, not take them away." But they wouldn't listen to me. Then one day, when I saw that the whole community was going to be removed, I went to the residents and said: "We're going to have to do something together. We need environmental education here, but we don't have a professional, we're going to do it ourselves." Then they said: "What are we going to do?" I said: "The first thing ... We're going to clean up the whole community. The second thing we're going to do is a vegetable garden." "But why, Lia? I can afford to buy a tomato; I can afford to buy lettuce." I said: "It's not a question of being able to buy it, it's a question of learning to deal with nature, of having a harmony with nature that we don't have. So, let's make a vegetable garden, because through the vegetable garden we'll bring sustainability into the community, we'll teach you how to live in harmony with nature." ... And today our village is an example of sustainability (see Figures 7 and 8). ... I learnt everything I know in Vila Nova Esperança.

Interviewer: This issue of the collective, community and nature.

Lia: Yes, and I learnt by doing. I had to learn by doing.

Figure 7: Lia Observing Residents

Note: Lia is observing two community residents, Natan and Carol, helping to look after the vegetable garden.

Figure 8: Lia in the Community Garden

Note: Lia is passing between the beds of the community garden and the greenhouse with tender plants.

I would like to explore two aspects of Antonio's and Lia's ways of life and personalities (in Vygotskian terms): their agency/activism and involvement with environmental education, as well as their preoccupation with poor life conditions.

Antonio began the Green CEU Project observing the “*lack of greenery,*” “*the children wouldn't have a favourable environment in which to live out their childhood experiences,*” and that CEU “*was very arid, very hot,*” with only “*artificial shades.*” So, he decided to create Green CEU (“*I proposed – to myself, not to anyone else – that I would change this environment through a project.*”) (Narrative 3), anchored in his memories and experiences of a past rural life. In Narratives 1 and 2, he denounces the situation of the towns that make up the Greater São Paulo area (“*dormitory,*” “*precarious,*” “*with no green areas*”) and tells us he used to write messages to Itapevi Town Hall with the subject “*Town without a park*” to claim for better environmental conditions. In Narrative 3, he reports the problem with the municipal workers who “*cut down, damaged more than 50 trees.*” Thus, he was not simply a melancholic observer of the degradation of towns or the arid conditions of the CEU's external areas and their surroundings. He became an environmental agent/activist.

Lia tells us about the “*process to remove all the families*” from Vila Nova Esperança because they “*were degrading the environment*” and the fight against prosecutors for the community not to be removed. In this process, she became an acclaimed leader. In Lia's case, activism was a dialectical product of participation in a social movement. In the beginning, she used to have an

individualistic vision: “I never even cared about the environment. Do you know when you care about earning money and working? I would leave in the morning, would go to work, come home in the evening ... I didn’t care. For me, I was living, I had food, I had the things I needed, right?” (Narrative 4).

Antonio does not remember when he became aware of environmental issues. In Lia’s story, activism generated praxis and awareness to her and the other families.

Stetsenko (2017) proposes an approach to agency that she calls *the transformative activist stance*, based on the dialectical premises of Vygotsky’s project and the broader foundations in Marxist philosophy:

From the position of the transformative activist stance (TAS), persons are agents not only for whom “things matter” but also who themselves matter in history, culture, and society and, moreover, who come into being as unique individuals through their activist deeds, that is, through and to the extent that they take a stand on matters of social significance and commit to making a difference by contributing to changes in the ongoing social practices. This means that there is no way that we can extract ourselves out of this activist engagement. (p. 230)

In addition to being inspired by Vygotsky, she is also inspired by the ideas of Paulo Freire, for whom praxis forms consciousness.

There is a plurality in human beings’ relationship with the world, as they respond to a wide variety of challenges. ... Their plurality is not only in the face of challenges that come from their context, but in the face of the same challenge. In the constant play of its responses, it changes in the very act of responding. They organise themselves. They choose the best answer. They test themselves. They act. They do all this with the certainty of someone using a tool, with the awareness of someone facing something that challenges them. In the relationships that human beings establish with the world, there is therefore a plurality in this very singularity. (Freire, 1983, pp. 39–40)

The ecological awareness that, in Antonio’s case, was constructed little by little emerged to Lia when she had to act: “Then people said: ‘Lia, you have to be the leader here.’ ... Then I started taking part in meetings with prosecutors ... Then I began to understand what was going on.” Lia’s development as an active agent was part of the organisation of her consciousness that, for Vigotski (2001) and Volóchinov (2018)—from the Bakhtinian Circle—is a meaningful, relational, discursive, and ideological process.

Antonio learned about plants, trees, animals, soil, harms of pesticides, and constellations slowly, during his life, working with the land in his rural/urban reality. Lia had to learn faster, during the political struggle: “I learnt by doing. I had to learn by doing,”

Human beings are active. The action he/she takes on his/her surroundings to provide the conditions necessary to maintain the species is called human action. All human action is work, and all work is geographical work.

There is no production that is not the production of space, and there is no production of space that takes place without labour. For men, to live is to produce space. (Santos, 2021, pp. 96–97)

The production of space involves challenges and conflicts. According to Antonio:

I think people were even afraid to do that, because when I started, they said: “No, the structure, the format of CEU can’t be changed. What was done, the way it was done, has to remain.” And I think that’s wrong. A school needs to be green. (Antonio, Narrative 3)

In this geographical and political work, Antonio and Lia learned from and taught others in *teaching relationships* (Smolka, 1988).

Then I started taking part in meetings with prosecutors from the Environmental Prosecutor's Office. Then I began to understand what was going on. Then I said: "Prosecutor, why? Instead of removing those people from there, from that space, who have been living there for years, since before the environmental law, why not bring environmental education?" (Lia, Narrative 4)

From the social struggle to the community agents, faced with the threat of their homes being removed: *"We're going to have to do something together. We need environmental education here, but we don't have a professional, we're going to do it ourselves"* (Narrative 4).

Antonio considered it important that children could have the experiences that he had had as a child in Carapicuíba: *"climbing a tree, having a picnic under a tree, eating a fruit, picking from their own trees"* (Narrative 3). Children who live in underprivileged areas in São Paulo more specifically hardly ever have these experiences: *"Making it possible that the school can give these children this experience that they no longer have, right? They no longer have it because of the precariousness we see in families"* (Narrative 1).

Through the Green Unified Educational Centre Project, Antonio believes that children will have lifelong experiences (*perezhivaniya*, in Vygotskian terms) in contact with nature. This also has the pedagogical meaning of teaching them to take care of nature, and to love plants and animals. He even calls the hole where he throws the seeds a *"cradle"*. In Portuguese, the word *cova* (grave) is used for the hole where one places a seed for germination. Antonio, however, calls it *berço* (cradle).

Lia also teaches adults in the community to take care of their rubbish, to plant what they will eat, and to care about the children in the village, which also has a pedagogical purpose: *"You don't have to take people out of the woods. You have to teach these people to live in harmony with the woods, not take them away"* (Narrative 4).

Conclusion

In the context of this research, understanding the process of the production of space in Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru and its surroundings is necessary to comprehend the contradictions that permeate the dynamics of its operation and the social dynamics of its agents. Many of them are children and adults living in situations of vulnerability. Analyses then are about the process of transformation of the space in places for these agents throughout the existence of this facility, and even before, in the stories of occupation and migration. This means that they are also about the appropriation and signification of Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru, as well as the territory, by its agents (team, students and communities).

In this article, I analysed four narratives about the Green Unified Educational Centre Project and the vegetable garden of Vila Nova Esperança. These came from two interviews, one with a Unified Educational Centre agent and the other with a community leader from a surrounding area. Both were concerned with serious local problems of hunger, health, housing, and education, and told us their stories of committed practices. From their narratives, I could perceive the transformation of these subjects into environmental agents, or transformative activists (Stetsenko, 2017). These aspects are now part of their personality and discourse, in a consideration of intense relation between human beings and nature: *"Wow, what a context, what a contradiction! How are you going to get nature out of nature?"* (Lia, Narrative 4).

These agents' projects are in line with proposals for the pedagogy of place, such as Paulo Freire's situated pedagogy, place-based learning (Cohen & Rønning, 2017), or the curriculum based on the concepts of emotional geographies (Webb et al., 2021), lived space (Serra, 2021) or *querência*

(Ault, 2008). This last term is used by Ault (2008) in the sense of the deepest feelings and beliefs that bind us to places linked to “*personal experience and commitment to community*” (p. 605); or, as analysed by Gouwens and Henderson (2021), *querência* is important for migrant families “to feel a sense of belonging to a new place” (p. 5).

In addition to learning about and working with the environment, the people from CEU Uirapuru and Vila Nova Esperança will feel part of these places which, instead of being inhospitable and “*very ugly, dry, arid,*” can become lived and felt spaces, meaningfully produced and re-signified, and part of a memorable territory.

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