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Repress, Occupy, or Instruct? *An Action-Research Study with Justice-Involved Youth in Brazil*

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Abstract

This study aims to present, analyze, and discuss an action-research educational experience conducted in a detention center of the Juvenile Justice System in northeastern Brazil. Methodologically, the research was grounded in bibliographic, documentary, and field approaches, using the following research procedures: I. participant observations to closely examine the educational practices developed by educators (teachers and social educators) with male adolescents aged 12 to 17 years; II. establishment of agreements, dialogues, observations, collaborative actions, conflict mediations, and propositions to guide pedagogical activities in the socio-educational unit; III. preparation of a field diary to support the construction of a record of experiences; IV. production of pedagogical resources from the educational practices analyzed and experienced, employing theoretical tools of socialist pedagogical approaches. The research findings identified objectives, content, values, and methods that are aligned with three foundational pedagogical approaches: the Pedagogy of “learning to learn,” Competence Pedagogy, and Repressive Pedagogy. These approaches are eclectically combined in educational practices, proving to be minimally preventive and lacking in deliberate pedagogical character.



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To situate the Brazilian case within a broader analytical framework, this article begins with a general overview of juvenile justice from a global perspective, drawing on selected Western juvenile justice models. It then proceeds to examine the educational practices of social educators and teachers working with male adolescents aged 12 to 17 who are deprived of their liberty in a juvenile detention center (referred to in Brazil as a socio-educational unit - detention facility) located in the country's northeastern region.

Globally, the protection of at-risk youth is implemented through three models of public action. The first centers on the family, which is held responsible for children. Parents are legally required to care for and protect them until they reach the age of majority, which means that minors generally exercise their rights through parental authority. The second model emphasizes programs that invest in the development of young people, aiming to build the future by focusing on younger generations. The third model places the child at the center as an autonomous subject and the primary agent of their own actions. In this approach, children are recognized as subjects of rights and are encouraged to participate in decisions affecting their lives. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) also establishes state responsibilities in juvenile justice. Consequently, children labeled as “offending” must be treated under a specific juvenile justice framework, distinct from that of adults. The state plays a critical role in recognizing young people as rights-bearing subjects. For example, Article 37 of the CRC stipulates that governments must safeguard children's freedoms, protect them from ill-treatment, ensure access to age-appropriate needs, and provide legal assistance (United Nations, 1989).

Three models of juvenile justice can be distinguished across countries. The first, a tutelary or paternalistic model, emphasizes the juvenile's lack of criminal responsibility and focuses on educational measures rather than reparation. The second, a legalistic or guarantees-based model, seeks to correct the minor deemed “delinquent” through disciplinary interventions. The third, a mixed system, combines punishment with reparation, aiming to deter through swift and clear decisions while ensuring legal protection for the juvenile.

Although these models are rarely applied in a pure form, certain countries such as Belgium, Scotland, and Portugal lean toward a tutelary approach. France, Spain, Italy, and Germany adopt mixed systems, whereas England follows a guarantees-based model (Delannoy, 2007).

In addition to the European examples, North American countries illustrate different applications of these juvenile justice models. The United States predominantly follows a legalistic or guarantees-based approach, emphasizing individual accountability and disciplinary interventions, although considerable variation exists between states, with some adopting more punitive measures akin to adult criminal justice and others favoring rehabilitative programs. In contrast, Canada exemplifies a mixed system with a strong socio-educational orientation, which emphasizes rehabilitation, reintegration, and the protection of youths' legal rights. This approach combines educational measures with proportionate sanctions, aiming to balance accountability with the development of autonomy and social inclusion.

Brazil emphasizes a socio-educational and freedom-oriented approach rather than a criminal justice one. However, within detention facilities, violence and punishment are comparable to adult prisons, complicating efforts to foster a culture of peace and emancipation.

To this end, and building on the previous discussion of juvenile justice models, this study employs an action-research methodology grounded in the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Antonio Gramsci, Anton Makarenko, Moisey Pistrak, Dermeval Saviani, Stéphane Bonnéry, and

Jean-Pierre Terrail, among others, translating various socialist pedagogical approaches into the juvenile justice sphere.

This transposition highlighted the approaches' principles, objectives, and methods for the intellectual, social, and moral development of adolescents. It entailed a theoretical synthesis derived from an action-research experience in the Juvenile Justice System of a capital city in northeastern Brazil, aimed at understanding the significance of enacting a socialist pedagogical praxis. This praxis seeks to address the many contradictions of the prevailing official (bourgeois) pedagogy, with the ultimate goal of fostering the right to free, public, and comprehensive education.

The educational reflections presented in this manuscript also draw on the author's personal history, having experienced homelessness and lived in shelters in a city in the interior of São Paulo state during his childhood and adolescence (1989–2007), alongside individuals labeled as “offenders,” “rebels,” “outcasts,” and “delinquents.”

Considering the aforementioned goals, this study was organized into four interconnected sections: I. Research Methodology; II. Foundations for a Socialist Pedagogical Approach in the Juvenile Justice System; III. Results and Discussion of Educational Experiences; IV. Final Remarks.

Research Methodology

This project was approved by the Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar), as well as by the government of the state of Ceará. The methodology was underpinned by an epistemological approach that aims to produce the concrete in thought through the process of abstraction, analysis, and synthesis of reality, grounded in the principles of historical and dialectical materialism for knowledge production (Marx, 2005; Marx & Engels, 2007).

We start from the particular, namely the contradictions in the formation of youth in conflict with the law, seek its relations within the social totality understood as historical movement and as the concrete in thought or theory, and then develop contributions to pedagogical praxis, using observations, directed dialogues, and semi-structured interviews conducted in a socio-educational unit in the state of Ceará, northeastern Brazil, in 2016, with reflections expanded between August 2022 and March 2024. This dialectical approach emphasizes the inseparability of practice and theory in the production of scientific knowledge (Kosik, 1976; Vygotsky, 2001; Saviani, 2019; Gramsci, 1978; Gramsci, 2001).

Sandra Corazza's words are enlightening for grasping the dialectical method of producing systematized knowledge:

[...] knowledge is understood as the movement that starts from “**syncretism**” (sensory, empirical, and perceived concrete) and is mediated by **analysis** (abstraction, separation of particular elements from a whole, identification of essential elements, causes, and contradictions) to reach **synthesis** (the thought concrete, a new and more elaborate concrete, a transforming practice). (1991, p. 22).

Within this framework (social practice – theory – social practice), the social relevance of action research was acknowledged, in which the investigation is conducted in direct connection

with the social contradictions that emerge from practice, aiming to develop socialist pedagogical contributions for the comprehensive formation of youth in conflict with the law.

Specifically, this research used bibliographic, documentary, and field approaches, applying the following procedures: I. participant observations to closely examine the educational practices developed by educators (teachers and social educators) with male adolescents aged 12 to 17 years; II. establishment of agreements, dialogues, observations, collaborative actions, conflict mediations, and propositions to guide pedagogical activities in the socio-educational unit; III. creation of a field diary to support the construction of a record of experiences; IV. production of pedagogical resources from the educational practices analyzed and experienced, employing theoretical tools of socialist pedagogical approaches.

Regarding participant observation, a field diary was prepared detailing the space, the resources used, the discourses, and the educational practices, highlighting the expressions of the adolescents during the period of institutionalization (Whyte, 2005; Creswell, 2013; Bogdan & Biklen, 2010; Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016).

In this way, the diary was produced within an action-research and ethnographic framework, through direct engagement in the participants' primary setting, with the intention of planning and learning with them, gaining their trust, and understanding their social world (Lewin, 1946; Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

The researcher's experiences and observational studies conducted in youth detention settings indicate the importance of listening to detained youth about the educational processes they experienced, allowing for a more comprehensive identification and analysis of pedagogical practices. Therefore, the field diary included detailed records of observed events and the researcher's interpretations during participation in school-based and non-school-based pedagogical activities (Bogdan & Biklen, 2010; Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016).

Furthermore, this study is justified for three main reasons. First, the educational issue of adolescents accused of committing offenses in judicial proceedings represents one of the most urgent themes today, requiring studies that develop theoretical and practical pedagogical proposals to support the educational actions of teachers and social educators in the socio-educational system. Second, there is a need to assimilate and further develop the contributions of socialist pedagogical approaches to the education of youth in conflict with the law, aiming to reduce anxiety, feelings of failure, loss of rights, and emotional suffering, as well as to overcome the repressive and authoritarian automatism of institutional education at this stage of the life course of adolescents deprived of liberty. Third, based on the state of the art on this topic, considering articles published in journals evaluated by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) as Qualis A (Francisco & Lopes, 2020), it can be observed that there is a limited number of studies and research groups employing action-research methodologies to understand, analyze, and contribute to the formation of young people deprived of liberty.

Socialist Pedagogy in the Juvenile Justice System

We recognize that education is fundamental to human relationships and shaped by political, ideological, and social objectives, offering opportunities for active engagement in the conservation, reproduction, or transformation of the social structure. Education, inherently, is not

neutral; it embodies an ethical-political, philosophical, and pedagogical ideology and is collectively shaped by various classes and social groups.

Thus, education can be described as the “act of producing, in each individual, the humanity that is historically developed by all human beings” (Saviani, 2019, p. 41). With this understanding, pedagogy (the science of education) aims to achieve two main objectives: identifying the cultural and natural elements that individuals need to assimilate, and discovering and creating the most effective teaching and learning methods to facilitate this assimilation, which may involve both maintaining and altering society (Rochex, 2015; Terrail, 2024; Bonn  ry, 2025).

Our goal is to address and transform the conditions that perpetuate marginalization, high dropout rates, and class oppression in the education system affecting adolescents and youth in conflict with the law. We generally understand these individuals as members of the collective proletariat, subjected to the military, technocratic (efficiency with minimal expenditure), and corporate influence over the State, aligned with the interests of the private property system.

In our effort to propose alternatives to punitive, technocratic, and New School (Escola Nova) educational movements that reinforce segregation and social reproduction within traditional formal education, we seek to outline principles, objectives, and methods for a socialist pedagogical approach in decision-making within the socio-educational system. It is worth noting that, before developing theoretical formulations, it was necessary to engage in practical experience, which subsequently informed the development of theoretical ideas. This process enables the translation of socialist pedagogy into the field of juvenile justice (Francisco, 2025; Francisco & Saviani, 2026).

It is important to emphasize that, in our conception of socialist pedagogy, the purpose of schooling is not to transmit messages of political action, but to provide access to the advanced forms of written culture and, therefore, to reflective and comprehensive thought about the world through the appropriation of the cultural heritage handed down by previous generations (S  ve, 1964; Terrail, 2016; Saviani, 2019; Terrail, 2024; Bonn  ry, 2025).

Thus, the criterion of a good pedagogy is that it be effective for everyone; it can only achieve this if it ensures the same intellectual rigor for all social groups, including, of course, working-class youth in conflict with the law.

Challenges for Work in Socio-Educational Measures

Before exploring the nuances of socialist pedagogy, it is essential to examine the Brazilian socio-educational system. Unlike traditional schooling, this system caters to adolescents and youth in conflict with the law, individuals who have committed offenses and are now institutionalized and under state supervision.

Given the unique nature of the socio-educational system, the educational process for young people under justice involves non-traditional schooling. Under ideal conditions for implementing judicial measures, there should be an interdependence between this non-school education and formal schooling. However, this is not always the case. Educators, including social educators and technical staff (psychologists, teachers, and social workers), are tasked with ensuring these young people’s access to and retention in school education throughout their socio-educational measure. This effort aligns with the rights specified in the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA) of

1990, the Federal Constitution of 1988, and the National System of Socio-Educational Service of 2012.

The socio-educational system encompasses two fundamental types of measures: those involving deprivation of liberty in closed settings and those implemented within the community. During the implementation of these judicial measures, a significant challenge is the inadequate integration between intellectual education and the productive labor of detained youth. This situation primarily requires the allocation of sufficient time for independent reading in subjects such as literature, grammar, history, geography, philosophy, and English, alongside exercises aimed at strengthening continuous learning in core academic disciplines, including mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology.

In closed environments with deprivation of liberty, our action-research study shows that adolescents are subjected to a formal, militarized pedagogy. This approach is characterized by a modern humanist “learning to learn” discourse and standardized technical assessments. These measures, however, often serve merely to gloss over oppressive situations and prioritize individualized care aimed at achieving total quality in each adolescent’s progress.

This neoliberal approach to education isolates adolescents in a highly carceral, punitive, authoritarian, and artificial environment, thereby reproducing the institutional flaws of traditional penitentiary education models. These models are eclectic, incorporating punitive, militarized, technicist-productivist, corporate, and spontaneist pedagogical approaches, which foster distrust, fear, and violence - reflecting the destructive institutional culture of the capitalist state.

Furthermore, as these institutions often resemble prisons, the relationship between educators and students is frequently marked by the same traits (distrust, fear, and violence) reflecting the chaotic institutional culture perpetuated by the state.

Conversely, when education occurs in an open environment (e.g., supervised freedom and community service), there is a heightened potential for developing juvenile autonomy and responsibility. In this sense, in *The German Ideology* by Marx and Engels, the freedom of individuals emerges as a central goal to be pursued in relations among men and women. We yield the floor to the authors: “It is only in the community [with others that each] individual has the means to develop his faculties in all directions; only in the community, therefore, does personal freedom become possible” (Marx & Engels, 2007, p. 64).

Educational work in open environments, mainly carried out through deliberately planned formal education, is guided primarily by non-school educational dynamics. Among the challenges and objectives of pedagogical work in this mode are monitoring, guidance, disapproval of offending behavior, establishing family ties, and, above all, reintegrating adolescents into school to provide quality instruction. This can only be achieved through socio-educational measures implemented concretely within community life, in harmony with democratic principles that ensure access to classical knowledge through schooling. Such measures are essential for fostering the critical thinking of detained youth.

In this context, the Juvenile Judicial System as a whole, for normative reasons of rights guaranteed in special legislation, dictates the provision, access, and monitoring of education for all adolescents and young people, regardless of the type of socio-educational measure applied by the reference judge. Therefore, it is unacceptable to still conduct pedagogical work in the Socio-Educational System disconnected from school, scientific knowledge, and social life.

In the relationship between school and non-school education of offenders' minds and bodies, paradoxically, the execution of judicial sentences has followed a perspective focused on reclaiming and monitoring post-modern formal education, characterized by the creation of new life paths and projects for another future (idealism). This has led to a reduction in classroom hours and a decrease in content in youth education. This "post-modern" education is guided by neoliberal pedagogical eclecticism. It is fundamentally based on human capital theory, the reconfigured "learning to learn" from New School movements, and militarized educational monitoring, applied daily in a rigid, imposing, and repressive manner.

Under these circumstances, it is important to highlight that situations of violence and youth marginalization refer us to practices administered during the validity periods of the Minor Codes and that, even with the current special legislations for rights defense (a democratic advancement achieved in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s) have not yet been eliminated. These are practices that delegate to the Justice System a control and punishment that operates on inequalities, acts of violence, and selectivity among groups and social classes, however with new appearances and approaches immersed in neotechnicism, neoconstructivism, and the pedagogical approaches of "learning to learn".

The pedagogy of "learning to learn," so widespread today, refers to the core of *Escola Nova* pedagogical ideas, yet this motto has been redefined. In the context of the New School, "learning to learn" meant acquiring knowledge by oneself, adapting to the challenges of a developing society. The processes and relations between children and adults were then valued.

Conversely, in current circumstances, "learning to learn" is connected to the needs for updating, resilience, and flexibility, competencies required to increase employability chances. Without major conceptual demands and scientific rigor, this motto has been incorporated into the social actions of the State, in connection with business foundations, religious entities, labor unions, and community projects developed within the scope of CSOs and NGOs.

In agreement with Newton Duarte on the ideological character of the "learning to learn" motto:

[...] we interpret it as an unequivocal expression of the educational propositions in tune with the neoliberal project, considered a political project of adapting social structures and institutions to the characteristics of the capital reproduction process at the end of the 20th century. (Duarte, 2011, p. 3)

In general terms, this education cannot yield good results, as it is devoid of any rational sense and has no starting point or destination. There are not even reliable indicators for evaluating the progress of the learners' education during the fulfillment of socio-educational measures.

Additionally, it is evident that the carceral model of the socio-educational system is inherent to capitalist society and, therefore, reflects the interests of the market, social distinction, and private property. In this way, envisioning a society where the prison model is not the main form of accountability undoubtedly involves overcoming the capitalist system itself.

Given the aforementioned challenges, it falls upon us to advance the struggle and resistance towards overcoming bourgeois education concepts, as they reproduce marginality and class oppression.

Foundations for a Socialist Pedagogy in Youth Education

Socio-educational interaction requires dialogue and planned action by teachers and social educators with adolescents and young people, to problematize social vices and dangers, inequalities, and economic and cultural injustices that shape criminal culture (Makarenko, 1985).

From a socialist perspective, the educational process must enable mechanisms for detained youth to confront exclusion factors with awareness and perseverance, demanding from themselves the strictest conduct, being an example of struggle and moderation to others, vigilant to their principles as fighters, and seeking to overcome alienation, abandonment, poverty, unemployment, and school dropout, which currently dominate their lives.

In this process, it is necessary for educators to work with the offenders' subjectivity through critical content and organized collective activities, strengthening their instruction and intellectual growth. Among the participatory activities, the creation of weekly democratic assemblies is recommended, with representation from the pedagogical team, management, technicians, teachers, and students, to discuss roles, responsibilities, and concerns. The establishment of a disciplinary council with representatives elected by peers (up to two technicians, two social educators, two teachers, two adolescents, one technical coordinator, and the director) is also suggested, with daily meetings to deliberate on cases of indiscipline and biweekly meetings to evaluate progress based on four indicators: duration of measure compliance, behavior (absence of indiscipline in dormitories, sports, leisure, classroom, music, theater, etc.), participation in school and non-school activities, and academic performance assessed through the academic record. These indicators will inform technical reports, which, in turn, support the Justice System in determining the progression or termination of the imposed socio-educational measure. In other words, adolescents must be critically engaged in the realms of knowledge and work so that they can develop responses to the material challenges in their lives, becoming both agents and protagonists of their own life story.

This is the pedagogical spirit that animates revolutionary, fair, and equal education and provides it with meaning. In the socialist sense:

Every student must become both a fighter and a builder. The school should make clear to them what they should fight for and against, as well as what and how they should build and create. This leads to the following conclusions for the school: regarding the content of education, a tool for both struggle and creation; regarding the methods of study, the ability to apply these tools in practice; regarding formative tasks, the student's role in life. The following foundations are established: 1) the development of the foundations of the Marxist worldview, which should not be either abstract or dogmatic but rather realistic, or better yet, transformative of the world; 2) the inclination towards teaching through work, or more precisely, through production, which makes knowledge tangible and enables the mastery of specific, concrete objectives through scientific methods; 3) the shaping and guiding of young people's interests, or what we might call the organized management of life. (Berezanskaya et al., 2009, p. 117)

This transformative ontology of history, grounded in Marx, originates from the period when he moved to Paris, France (October/November 1843) to study, work, and start a family. It suggests that the theory and practice of labor must reach the working classes, becoming a material

force for human emancipation and “overthrowing all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being” (Marx, 2005, p. 151).

The pivotal issue of the materiality of socialist pedagogy with the working classes develops in this direction and gains prominence among pedagogical currents, bringing to life the principles of work, organization, self-discipline, and self-organization through three stages of the pedagogical method: problematization of social practice, theoretical instrumentation, and educational catharsis. In the interrelationship between these pedagogical stages, under the educator’s instruction, the goal is to overcome both a syncretic view of knowledge and youths’ tendencies toward infractions, offenses, and crimes.

Every civilizational process involving the maturation and advancement of societies necessitates, firstly, special attention and particular educational care concerning the teaching and learning processes of new generations.

As observed, pedagogical work involves indiscriminating care for all those experiencing their childhood, adolescence, and youth as periods of development and engagement.

By recognizing that everyone, without exception, shaped by the social and cultural relations of a constantly changing history, experiences these life stages as opportunities to develop balance, maturity, and critical thinking, it is essential that even those who may display antisocial behaviors or become offenders receive care, instruction, and proper guidance throughout their development.

Thus, it is insufficient to focus solely on one or a few needs impacting a young person’s life. Truly, education can be effective and transformative only in processes that comprehensively address the set of demands faced by those in the unique condition of development, be they children or adolescents.

In the day-to-day material and subjective conditions of a child’s life, various deficiencies can impact their existential state and human development, such as social, cultural, and economic hardships, which deepen feelings of abandonment and repression. This destructive reality, reflecting the contradictions of the capitalist and repressive State model, is unacceptable. The perpetuation of selective education, which overlooks certain fundamental rights or favors some at the expense of others, must not be tolerated.

Considering all facets of human development is a prerequisite for the fulfillment of rights, which are enhanced by formal/intentional instruction, as it enables focused work on consciousness, guiding the transition from particular common sense to scientific concepts and universal consciousness that foster an understanding of life in all its dimensions. Therefore, a new approach to life is possible only through intellectual activity, which will foster autonomous, reflective, and free thinking.

Moreover, socialist pedagogy presupposes a concrete understanding of reality, aimed at creating the best conditions for equitable access to both material and immaterial resources, fostering a life of genuine opportunities, intellectual development, and true well-being for all.

Contributions to Educational Practice

Regarding the pedagogical actions of educators, the starting point cannot be violence, militarization, the imposition of content, or a superficial dialogue about affection (awareness of

life project plans). Instead, it should be the problematization of social practice, combining the mediation of systematized knowledge with the encouragement of intellectual rigor and critical thinking, thereby nourishing the cultural dimension of freedom and creative action in the social situations of students. This approach addresses the concrete needs of young people to free themselves from the binds and alienation that introject heteronomy (Freire, 2011; Rochex, 2015; Saviani, 2021; Terrail, 2024; Bonn  ry, 2025). Young people need to experience both a breath of freedom and the structured guidance necessary for autonomy, intellectual development, and the responsible exercise of citizenship, regardless of whether or not they are offenders.

The reality in which students are immersed is the fundamental starting point of educational practice. This implies a higher degree of awareness of the social contradictions in the pedagogical relationship built with educators, aiming to produce, under possible conditions, a new form of sociability.

This path can be operationalized dialectically between formal schooling and non-formal education in the execution of judicial measures, aiming at the social insertion of adolescents into family life, schooling, productive activities, and community life.

For this pedagogical conception to be more successful, it is necessary to properly welcome adolescents. This involves introducing the structure of the socio-educational measure, the spaces, the professional team, the disciplinary rules of coexistence to be followed, available leisure and sports activities, the planned school cultural activities, in addition to free time and the indicators for assessing the progress of the socio-educational measure.

It is important to underline that during educational work, school teaching must never be secondary to the bureaucracy of the Juvenile Justice System (especially the individualized technical services and reports), security procedures, and extracurricular activities.

School education, combined with popular interests, must be the determinative (and most important) formative space in the education of students throughout the enforcement of the judicial sentence. Saviani's words are insightful:

A pedagogy combined with popular interests will, therefore, value the school. It will not be indifferent to what happens within it and will be committed to ensuring that the school functions well. Hence, it will be interested in effective teaching methods. Such methods will go beyond traditional and new methods, overcoming by incorporating the contributions of both. Therefore, they will stimulate the activity and initiative of students without relinquishing the teachers' initiatives. They will encourage dialogue among students and with the teacher but will not neglect the dialogue with the historically accumulated culture. They will consider the interests of students, their learning pace, and psychological development but without losing sight of the logical systematization of knowledge, its ordering and grading for the effects of the transmission-assimilation process of cognitive content. (Saviani, 2013a, p. 232)

Once the parameters of educational action, both in the school and non-school settings, are established, the diffuse preferences and violent behaviors of the detained youth will lose strength in the light of meeting the challenges posed by collective socio-educational planning that are consistent with the interests of a more engaged, resilient, and fulfilling life, moving towards the construction of a more just and fraternal society.

Considering what has already been said regarding the syncretic visions and stances of students during their intellectual formation in judicial measures, it falls to teachers and social educators to facilitate exchanges of ideas and practices, enabling the more advanced students to work with the newer ones in the dynamics of teaching and learning, focusing on broader social practice and the scientific knowledge needed to prepare them for contemporary debates.

Certainly, once inside socio-educational units, maximum investment should be made in pedagogical moments of cultural, artistic, and professional elevation, always situating the collective of adolescents in a critical stance towards any authoritarian, repressive, and unjust social practices.

Observing the experiences and research practices not only in socio-educational units but also in open judicial measures for adolescents, the presence of systematic exclusion and guardianship becomes evident. These measures, often inconsistent and inherently authoritarian, contribute to an increase in the number of delinquents and illiterates in society.

As a counterpoint to this well-known reality, the socialist perspective of pedagogical action cannot ignore these contradictions of the Juvenile Justice System and must gradually seek to create the necessary conditions for overcoming State guardianship, through a more organic educational praxis that adheres to the interests of the subaltern classes. This approach aims to penetrate the guidelines and practices of bourgeois education and radically change them, reorienting them toward the purposes of a sociality that values the participation of young people in community, productive, school, and family life.

This movement of change will not occur spontaneously or even through violent force, but primarily with consistent attitudes and actions from within the system, practically reorienting the bourgeois educational process towards the purposes of working-class education.

In the mediations of pedagogical action, educators need to foster dialogue, self-discipline, and student engagement in studies, love in daily tasks and work – fundamental factors for the autonomy of thought, for creative and free action, which can reflect on the change in delinquent behavior, guided by an enlightened consciousness that refers to the possibility of another life and a new social reality. This expresses a break from the delinquent and institutionalizing world of Justice and, not least, the struggle against the outdated system of capital accumulation and production.

Self-discipline implies providing meaningful moments of self-direction in educational tasks, built and developed based on three interrelated components: “1) the ability to work collectively and to find one’s place in collective work; 2) the ability to embrace each task in an organized manner; 3) the capacity for organizational creativity” (Berezanskaya et al., 2009, p. 121).

This valorization of experiencing being, which finds power in the realms of freedom, intellectual and muscle-nervous activity, and self-organization, is the principle, goal, and method of an updated socialist pedagogy in the education of popular classes. Thus, a pedagogical approach is verified, one that values child and youth development, in contrast to the bourgeois conception of education (business, military, technical, and selective).

These are the fundamental pillars of education in the context of deprivation of liberty, practiced even by Antonio Gramsci during his time in prisons in Italy. Gramsci’s collective educational initiative can be highlighted in the creation of a school with the prisoners on the island

of Ustica. The philosopher was sent there on 8 November 1926, and without wasting time, took on the task of directed studies with his fellow political and common prisoners (Nosella, 2010).

In the disheartening experience of entering into deprivation of liberty, which ultimately brings together the various strata of the working classes, there is a lesson learned on the very first night of sleep inside the cell, a lesson that is neither taught nor learned for living in prison. Achieving peace and freedom is impossible in an environment that undermines the very existence of the imprisoned, placing them in a state of subalternity and invisibility, and depriving them of access to the material and immaterial means necessary to be human. In summary, boredom, anxiety, violence, the commodification of education, deschooling, militarization, institutional repression, and the fear of losing liberty are unfortunately common experiences.

The reunion of the young offspring of the working classes in internment vividly embodies the class struggle, facilitating a rediscovery of oneself and solidarity with other oppressed individuals. In this space, they recognize themselves as comrades in a shared, albeit fragmented and disorganized, battle, frequently obscured by bourgeois culture.

Truly, living and learning effectively is untenable in an environment imbued with the characteristics of a prison, complete with bars, handcuffs, constant surveillance, and repression. It is imperative to transform the repressive nature of internment education into a pivotal period for self-reflection and active participation, aiming to surmount the factors that lead to the marginalization of individuals.

The ultimate goal of Gramsci's unitary school is precisely "to transform into freedom what today is a necessity." It is, therefore, a school of freedom, that is, a school where one is taught to be free. This freedom, like fantasy, is not an abstraction but is historically determined. Therefore, it must be taught. [...] It is the freedom of the body that has incorporated (disciplinarily) the technique and through this expresses itself more deeply and fully (Nosella, 2010, p. 180).

In this scope, the effectiveness in the execution of judicial measures will be developed gradually, in connection with community life, due to the conquest of awareness as an instrument of social emancipation in the unitary struggle of the working class. This conquest can be stimulated and it should be in the interrelation between the action of teachers (school education) and social educators and cultural animators (non-school education), obviously without any of the parties directly interfering in the specific duties of each professional. The pedagogical process, because it is not natural but provoked by the organization of the necessary tools for the realization of educational work, that is, the activity of intellectual production, also muscular-nervous between educators and students, is full of challenges not always pleasurable, as it requires effort, annoyance, and suffering (Gramsci, 2001; Saviani, 2013b; Terrail, 2016; Bonn  ry, 2025).

Once the problematizing relationship is established, based on prior planning, dialogue, respect, and trust in the youth, there is much more adherence and meaning to the collective pedagogical organization. Thus, the socialist pedagogical work encompasses the problematization of social practice, moments of instruction-theorization, free activities, work, leisure, the basic routines of the day (waking up, making the bed, having breakfast, lunch, and dinner, showering, and sleeping) and everything possible with the students, their respective families, and the community.

Given this, at the end of the collective socio-educational process, it is expected that the student will have changed their vision and behavior given the problems faced in life, which will only be possible with the individual and subjective appropriation of knowledge and intellectual elevation. But to reach this level of instruction and adequate awareness (understood as catharsis), it is necessary, first, to eliminate the deleterious influences of bourgeois education, eclectically articulated around traditional, spontaneous, “learning to learn”, repressive, corporate, and technicalist foundations.

In essence, the goal of socialist pedagogy is to promote the transition from popular understanding to elaborated knowledge, ensuring that the working classes have access to emancipatory and demanding instruction, and thereby fostering autonomous, free thought and action (Sève, 1964; Gramsci, 1978; Manacorda, 2008; Nosella, 2010; Freire, 2011; Terrail, 2013; Terrail, 2016; Lombardi, 2017; Saviani, 2021; Saviani & Duarte, 2021; Bonn  ry, 2025).

The mediation for this process is the educator’s professional and technical commitment to the students, which should reflect their lived reality and interests, foster discipline and dialogue, and include the scientific, artistic, and philosophical content taught in school. It also involves the organized action of young people in social interactions for freedom, such as participation in assemblies and disciplinary councils, allowing the entire group to function as protagonists, organically elevating the cultural level of each individual and of the group as a whole.

Within the framework of critical theories of education, and in alignment with the construction of a socialist world, we can situate the importance of Paulo Freire’s liberatory pedagogy, as it, like socialist pedagogy, advocates the necessity of democratizing school knowledge for the popular classes through a dialogical and problematizing approach to social reality (Freire, 2006; Freire, 2011). Assimilating school content is an indispensable condition for what Paulo Freire calls conscientization and which, according to Dermeval Saviani, corresponds to the pedagogical moment of catharsis, that is, the elevation of the student’s consciousness, the passage from common-sense understanding to philosophical awareness. Liberatory pedagogy, rooted in the ideas of Paulo Freire and inspired by the phenomenology of Christian personalism and Marxism, advocates a non-authoritarian form of teaching, centered on dialogue and guided by the teacher based on generative (problem-posing) themes, observed through the teacher’s engagement with the concrete social reality of their students and recorded therein, in order to establish a dialogical teaching relationship, directing the learning process from common/popular understanding toward awareness of social problems, using scientific knowledge as a tool. Indeed, in the mediation of teaching and learning, Paulo Freire emphasizes access to school content, actively mobilized for cultural advancement and the liberation of the oppressed from the bonds of capital.

Furthermore, Paulo Freire and Dermeval Saviani also share the pedagogical principles of French sociologist Jean-Pierre Terrail, who advocates the need for a rigorous education for working-class students (Terrail, 2013; Terrail, 2016; Terrail, 2024).

This socialist pedagogical horizon, consistent with the critical sociology of instruction, seeks to nurture intellectually engaged individuals, fostering effort, responsibility, and consistent respect for and with children and adolescents.

Results and Discussion on Educational Experiences

Cultural development, which involves the assimilation of systematized knowledge leading to critical and autonomous consciousness, cannot emerge if left solely to the free choice and spontaneous learning of children and adolescents. Field experience, supported by observations and formal teaching practices in both school and non-school settings, demonstrates that spontaneity alone does not foster critical thinking or true autonomy. Rather, these capacities depend on deliberate pedagogical intervention, structured guidance, and explicit instruction from educators. Left unchecked, spontaneity tends to foster disorder, dispersion, lack of commitment, violence, and laziness (Terrail, 2016; Saviani, 2021; Terrail, 2024; Bonn  ry, 2025). At the same time, one can observe the spontaneous emergence of youth movements of revolt and rebellion against all forms of imprisonment, imposition, and exacerbated oppression.

Before the adoption of spontaneous pedagogy, faced with the indiscipline and revolt of learners, professionals often resorted to authoritarianism (the pedagogy of shouting) and force to obtain obedience, fostering fear as a control mechanism, without, however, achieving the desired educational success. It was even worse when educational authorities and public security managers, together, believed that the solution to the institutional crisis lay in increasing force, imposition, and technical control, making use of military intervention indiscriminately to contain disorderly children and adolescents.

This example can certainly illustrate more comprehensively some possibilities of socialist pedagogy for a transformative school, taking as a reference the action-research work conducted inside a unit in the state of Cear   in 2016, with reflections expanded from August 2022 to March 2024.

Upon arriving at the socio-educational unit to conduct observations and field research notes, I encountered an oppressive, disordered, and aggressive system, both for educators and young people. This motivated me not only to record events but also to react, seeking to overcome the institutional condition of the detained adolescents and find alternatives to State repression, in conjunction with the socio-educational community. I faced many limitations in the time and scope of my action research, in addition to having little decision-making power in daily life, in demands, and in the distressing tasks of executing the sentence of deprivation of liberty.

It is important to emphasize that in the context under study (the Northeast region of Brazil), as evidenced, the vast majority of institutionalized youth are Black and Brown. This phenotypic pattern reflects, among other factors, the enduring legacies of the slave-holding society, which produced its own marginalized populations within a social landscape hardened by domination, discrimination, and racism that persists to the present day.

These factors have reproduced and deepened social and institutional violence in Brazil, largely explaining the use of incarceration to punish and control these young people, who are increasingly immersed in a culture of crime.

In contrast, in the Southeast region, white individuals are overrepresented in all socio-educational settings. On average, there is one Black adolescent for every five white adolescents undergoing judicial measures. This racial profile is similar to that of the Southern states of Brazil, where most offenses are committed by white youth. This evidence indicates that the issue is not solely about Black and Brown youth being involved in delinquency. Nonetheless, it is important to note that these findings do not reveal the social and institutional racism faced by detained youth,

nor do they diminish the significance of Black movements' struggle against racism. The data suggest that there is not necessarily a direct correlation between skin color and delinquent behavior in these regions. This prompts a hypothesis: racism may operate in a para-structural manner (that is, alongside formal structures, camouflaged within institutionalized social and cultural relations) a phenomenon not fully captured by statistical indicators alone (Francisco, 2025).

Given this hypothesis, we recommend qualitative, ethnographic studies in settings where white individuals are predominantly institutionalized, which could assess whether discrimination against Black youth is more or less pronounced during the implementation of socio-educational measures.

Considering the well-documented racial prejudice in Brazilian society, Black youth who are detained and sentenced among white peers carry a socially normalized mark of deviance. This can result in brutal treatment, violence, and increased difficulty coping with the stigmas imposed on them. Indeed, overcoming the stigmas of institutionalization becomes even more challenging for this social group.

Given these social and institutional inequalities, the day-to-day reality within the socio-educational unit made even basic pedagogical planning extremely difficult. In this context, it was not even possible to discuss content or establish a pedagogical process with the teachers because of the lack of conditions for any type of formal teaching. It was essential, first, to understand the situations of violence and get to know the young people, the professionals, and the dynamics of the institution. Only after this understanding would it be possible to create the appropriate conditions to offer school teaching and other non-school educational activities. This change could not occur while the adolescents were locked up 24 hours a day in cells.

Before proceeding with the examples, it is important to highlight that educational practices involving physical punishment, which often result in public indignation and controversy, are not exclusive to modern times. Education through punishment was one of the main strategies used throughout history to shape the character of children and adolescents, both from privileged classes and less favored ones. Such disciplinary practices, which included the use of whips and rods, were widely employed among the Egyptians, Hebrews, and Greeks (between approximately 2000 and 400 BCE), and may persist for more millennia in family and institutional education, echoing in contemporary educational practices.

I vividly remember a symbolic moment in the socio-educational unit in Fortaleza during a rebellion. The military police battalion set up a corridor in the wings, leading to the cells and the central patio. The adolescents were forced to leave their cells and cross the corridor formed by the police with their hands behind their backs and heads down while they were beaten. At the same time, the social educators watched the actions of the military with approval. This contemporary practice illustrates how the corrective message is violently transmitted by the State: 'In the event of a rebellion, they will be straightened out by the use of billy clubs'.

I believe that repressive culture will not be easily eradicated from contemporary education. Specifically, the desire to teach through physical punishment, threats, and torture still is a part of our culture. Many believe that this method is effective in imposing authority, shaping character, and teaching what is right, good, and just. For this reason, the use of punishment and pedagogical imposition remains prevalent in education, both within the school environment and beyond, although these practices have been prohibited by law at various points in history.

On the one hand, the authoritarian and punitive practices of masters, educators, and teachers are not a recent development; on the other hand, there are numerous accounts from the times of the ancient Greeks and Egyptians of educators who were assaulted, beaten, and even murdered by their young disciples (480 BCE). Unfortunately, these instances persist today. We often come across news in the media or witness young students committing acts of violence, including assaults and even homicides, against their teachers. The contentious relationship between masters and disciples seems to be a constant throughout the history of human civilization.

Returning to the context under discussion and its participants, it is crucial to start by examining the concerns and expressions of the professionals in the socio-educational unit. The atmosphere was marked by alertness and apprehension within the entire socio-educational community, with authoritarian behaviors and statements rationalized by the belief they were essential to “prevent” potential violence from the youths. Furthermore, it was argued that the number of social educators available to supervise the adolescents in educational activities was insufficient. Consequently, it often became necessary to confine them to their cells.

For months, the adolescents were confined, receiving only basic meals (breakfast, lunch, and dinner) in shared dormitory cells. These cells had minimal direct lighting, lacked mattresses (destroyed in various uprisings), and featured wide bars but insufficient ventilation because of structural inadequacies, in the warm and humid climate typical of northeastern Brazil. Each cell contained merely two concrete beds and a small squat toilet.

The young people were forced to eat seated on the concrete floor, without any cloth or base for their meals. The use of forks and knives was prohibited. This was the standard living condition for all adolescents: demeaned.

Over a hundred adolescents were crowded together from different parts of the interior of Ceará state. Dressed poorly in old sandals, stained shorts, and without shirts, they were neglected, dirty, and suffering from scabies that required treatment. Despite having neatly trimmed or shaved heads and several tattoos, they appeared as young individuals who were forsaken, untamed, and impoverished. Confined in dark, sooty cells without paint, within a building entirely burnt (divided into five wings, each containing seven cells), they were subjected to the constant noise caused by banging on the barred windows and their shouting for help and demands throughout the day. Despite varying in age, interests, and backgrounds, these boys shared a commonality: they had committed some offense. Each, in their way, aimed to rebuild their life, yet had little to no expectations from the education provided by the State.

The adolescents could no longer endure such dire conditions. They rejected this form of education, voicing their dissatisfaction through aggressive defiance, foul language, and threats, inciting various forms of protest: rebellion, widespread anarchy, and impulsiveness. Both long-term inmates and newcomers experienced and continue to experience a reality akin to being caged in a zoo. Outside, the harsh reality of capitalism selectively and mercilessly discards young people, turning them into scapegoats. Occasionally, visits from officials, politicians, intellectuals, and advisors from Brasília occurred but seldom did these result in significant improvements to their living conditions.

In the brutal environment of the capitalist detention system, it is clear that every adolescent longs to exit such confines and achieve freedom, becoming the architect of their destiny, and navigating their life towards a new future.

On multiple occasions, we requested the cell doors to be unlocked to facilitate activities, aiming to liberate these individuals and counter the pervasive narratives of fear and violence. This shared adversity affected both staff and adolescents. Joy was scarce, and the routine was overwhelmingly monotonous, resembling less a school and more a den of criminals.

Some educators, regrettably disengaged and lacking in pedagogical skills, predominantly shaped the educational routine, earning the resentment of the adolescents. Nevertheless, a majority of the educators displayed patience and commitment in their efforts with the adolescents, as they shared similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

Educators struggled with poverty, wore tattered clothing, and received a meager and disgraceful salary, undermining the purpose of institutional education. This undervaluation of their profession did little to garner respect from the adolescents. Everyone struggled to survive in this educational setting, which more closely resembled a criminal enterprise, forming a distinct class of its own.



Figure 1. A group of boys behind bars.

Source: Archives of Priest Agnaldo Soares Lima, 2016.

Under these initial circumstances, we traversed the wings, moving from cell to cell, addressing the young people's appeals for help while also heeding the social educators' requests. We delivered numerous speeches to inspire hope for a new life within the institution under new management, emphasizing the importance of their collective engagement, the opportunity to leave behind a criminal past and focus on a future outside the confines of prison.

We envisioned a more liberated context for decarceration, still conceptualizing it as something to be collectively realized. We aimed to organize the young anarchists' forces towards the rational objectives of dismantling the prison's harmful education (authoritarian and technical)

and revitalizing their education and social relations towards authentic freedom, autonomy, and schooling.

Some adolescents listened to us attentively, while others mockingly associated us with the suit-clad officials who occasionally visited the institution and never returned. The educators, on the other hand, were truly demotivated and skeptical of any improvement in their work, yet they continued to show up every day, perhaps due to a lack of better options.

The most rebellious and dangerous individuals were swiftly transferred to larger facilities, commonly referred to as ‘the cave of irredeemable delinquents’. It was indeed a dire situation. The director claimed his unit was effective, but admitted that some individuals were simply irrecoverable and needed urgent transfer. This became a nearly weekly occurrence, as youth in conflict with the law, angry, rebellious, and often illiterate, steeped in a culture of crime, continued to arrive.

In the institution’s environment, there was no formal pedagogical direction; rather, a repressive approach dominated the institution’s juvenile justice practices.

In this context, it became imperative to rethink the organizational logic, halt arbitrary transfers and hostile treatment, and reassess priorities by fostering effective communication between staff and adolescents. Our goal was to lay the groundwork for a socialist pedagogical approach that prioritized not just the professional development of the staff but also the formal education of the adolescents, incorporating activities like grammar studies, sports, professionalization opportunities, art and music engagement, and promoting discipline, willpower, and responsibility as key elements for achieving autonomy.

We were aware of the significant contributions we could make to the young people, whose rights were being violated. Each adolescent had their own story, but all shared feelings of loneliness and abandonment.

The specific situation of isolation in the cells required a more spontaneous approach, allowing free movement, access to fresh air, and time to clear the mind and body. These elements of freedom and spontaneity, what could be called “positive spontaneity,” inherited from Rousseau, represented a significant and necessary advancement in the history of education. In socialist pedagogy, this spontaneity is not simply accepted, but critically appropriated and transcended: it reaches its highest expression when education is deliberate, linked to habits of self-discipline, pedagogical guidance, and youth protagonism in daily tasks. Unfortunately, this critical pedagogical orientation was completely overlooked due to the State’s chaotic, corporate, and repressive official pedagogy.

To address this situation, we proposed an alternative strategy: the organization of the first educational sports event involving more than two dozen adolescents. Starting from the premise that confinement was a primary issue, we believed an approach focused on body care and movement stimulation could be effective. Our idea was to prioritize physical education as a democratic science that fosters interaction among the young people, connecting them with themselves and each other. To this end, we sought authorization from the Unit’s director, who promptly approved it. This director, a progressive young man in his early thirties, displayed a firm, optimistic stance and expressed a clear desire to transform the institution’s entrenched culture of violence.

The proposal entailed organizing an afternoon of soccer and recreational activities among the inmates, aimed at building rapport and trust with them, involving them in organizing the activity, encouraging physical movement and self-care beyond their cells, and ultimately opening doors to new possibilities and educational responsibilities.

The proposal resonated with the adolescents and garnered support from the physical educators, educational colleagues, and some social educators. However, the teachers, affiliated with the State Education Department, remained resistant, not participating in the broader educational dynamics of the facility. They maintained that their role was strictly classroom education, focusing on intellectual learning.

The adolescents were keen on any initiative that would offer a break from their cells, their frustration often manifesting in rebellion. It is critical to acknowledge the significance of their subversive acts against the Judicial System as these were attempts to challenge the system and its formal laws. As detainees under judicial measures, they were in dire need of opportunities for education, sports, recreation, family visits, and advances in their legal situations.

The adolescents' eagerness to engage in physical activity both within and beyond the confined space underscores a fundamental human need for freedom and self-expression, conditions essential for the appropriation of knowledge and the development of critical and reflective identity as socio-historical beings. The harsh reality of being confined 24/7 in a small, dirty, and poorly ventilated cell, cut off from the outside world, undermines not only their physical and emotional well-being but also their potential for intellectual autonomy and critical consciousness, revealing the reproductive effects of repressive educational practices.

To empower the proposal, we took the initiative to unlock the cells and lead the activities, supported by the Governor of the state of Ceará, Camilo Santana of the Workers Party (PT), who authorized Priest Agnaldo Soares Lima to make emergency decisions during the crisis. Priest Lima endorsed the proposed actions.

The local authorities were primarily focused on preventing escapes, aiming to curb rebellions, violence, and breakouts in the detention center's daily operations. This situation presented a dual challenge: the political pressures that justified the confinement and the pressing need for a new pedagogical approach that would engage both the minds and bodies of the young inmates.

While unlocking the cells for activities proved impractical, we facilitated educational sessions focused on organizing and maintaining the facility. Periodically, we allowed some adolescents to leave their cells for cleaning, gardening, or kitchen duties. These small activities helped them make gradual progress. We also provided books for reading and group discussions, even within the cell confines. The inmates showed enthusiasm and a readiness to engage, demonstrating the significant impact of each small step towards building a connection. Every effort was a collective triumph.

This initiative not only meaningfully occupied the adolescents' time with intellectual and productive pursuits inside and outside their cells but also brought us closer to understanding them. It offered them a reprieve from their restrictive environment. Their parting requests for necessities and updates on their legal cases highlighted the growing trust between us. "We need clothes; I'm without slippers; I haven't seen my family; My legal case is stalled", they expressed. Every day presented a new challenge to overcome.

In collaboration with both professionals and adolescents, we succeeded in implementing immediate changes in response to the stalemate regarding discussions to make the facility's operations more flexible at that time. These changes included allowing the young to leave their cell dormitories and meeting basic needs such as clothing, and hygiene products, and providing medical, educational, psychological, and dental services.

Negotiating to open the gates proved difficult, taking several days before the concept was fully embraced, particularly for conducting the first physical education session after months of inactivity. Despite prior approval from the Director, the security coordinators were resistant, with fear being a major contributing factor to the impasse.

They justified their fear by claiming that the adolescents had weapons in their cells, prepared for rebellions and escape attempts. It was a period characterized by constant conflicts and tensions, a regrettable state of affairs that continues to this day. The security chiefs regarded us with clear disdain and frustration.

Indeed, the primary reason for the widespread confinement of the young people and the prohibition of physical education activities was the presence of weapons hidden in the cells, often concealed within squat toilets.



Figure 2. Young people during maintenance work at the Socio-educational Unit.

Source: Archives of Priest Agnaldo Soares Lima, 2016.

Confronted with this situation, we suggested removing these weapons, which were indeed utilized as instruments for rebellion, thereby fostering a strategic compromise between “State interests and the educational needs of the adolescents” at the time.

Despite the security team's opposition, the facility's management consented to this approach, on the condition that any weapons fabricated by the adolescents within their cells were to be confiscated.

The initiative for producing rebellions deserves to be highlighted, adolescents are very creative when it comes to subversion and, in truth, they were right in wanting to change the outdated organization of that environment. Even by force.

After reaching an understanding with both the management and security coordination, we re-engaged with the adolescents, aiming to move forward with the proposed activities and establish agreements. This involved their active participation in organizing the activities, with a focus on mutual respect and safety, and striving for the greatest degree of freedom achievable. True freedom, in our view, would only be realized when the program for executing judicial sentences is fully integrated within the community, a goal that remains pending in state policy.

As days passed, we found opportunities to release a few inmates for practical tasks, such as washing the patio, gardening, kitchen duties, managing the movie room, attending technical appointments, and so forth. Successes were celebrated collectively, while failures were shared disappointments.

These activities emphasized the significance of caring for ‘their home’ committing to organizational work, and participating in the Unit’s management. This approach is not about imposing tasks on young people but about making these tasks meaningful and involving them in the process. Broadening their experiences to include technological activities, engaging them, and familiarizing them with different working techniques at progressively complex levels, while not overlooking higher intellectual education, is undeniably the most crucial habit to foster discipline in both detained youth and educators. Otherwise, adolescents will be at the mercy of a chaotic and mechanically repressive environment, overwhelmed by it. Hence, it is important, on the one hand, to adapt to the educational environment, and on the other, to master it, transforming it according to new values, principles, ideologies, and methods that align with the needs of an institutional life oriented towards social, moral, and intellectual development in society.

Indeed, within this context, pedagogy cannot simply be coercive or voluntaristic, much less restrict young people’s activities to manual labor. On the contrary, emphasis should be placed on the holistic development of adolescents as assertive and critical individuals, provided with the best possible education, avoiding premature professionalization, which does not preclude the possibility of professional integration at the appropriate stage of each adolescent’s personality development.

During the dialogues, we began to form a broader organization with the adolescents, paving the way for creating an environment where their fundamental rights were respected. Bodies clinging to the bars were merely trying to escape and alter the repressive, mechanical routine, which made moving in this direction relatively straightforward.

The anticipation of sports activities sparked some hope for a general improvement in the young people’s everyday lives, who until then had been living in total confinement inside the dormitory cells. Certainly, realizing the adolescents’ fundamental rights required the cooperation and participation of all adolescents, making this achievement gradual. Therefore, the initial step of pedagogical action involves everyone, aiming for a relationship based on closeness and trust for identifying problems and then devising solutions.

Even though they were separated from each other, confined to cells and wings, the adolescents found a way to discuss the proposal by writing letters to establish coexistence rules among themselves. It is important to recognize that this intense mobilization followed the same pattern used for organizing rebellions and revolts, which even led to a change in management and a significant shift in the administration of judicial measures, under the responsibility of the then Governor of the state of Ceará, Camilo Santana. The written statements, some intercepted by security, essentially contained an agreement on non-violence and respect towards the educators.

After several hours of discussion among the young people, one of their representatives, in contact with the educator of the wing, informed us “It’s all good, we’re going to play soccer, you can relax, there won’t be any problem, everyone agrees.” Before initiating the activity, we kindly requested they relinquish any hidden weapons in the cells. With cautious mistrust, they surrendered the items. We managed to collect six buckets filled with rocks, iron, and makeshift weapons that could have been used in future revolts.

We were progressing towards the most anticipated moment: the actual release of more than two dozen adolescents for the activity, without, however, reducing the staff’s apprehension, especially the security chiefs.

All the Unit’s staff gathered to watch the educational activity, openly expressing their concerns about the potential for a tragic revolt. The technical team, psychologist, lawyer, pedagogical coordinator, teachers, social educators, and security guards assembled in a watchtower-like area with containment bars, from where they could oversee the long corridor leading to the adolescents’ cells.



*Figure 3. First sports activity outside the cells.
Source: Archives of Julio Cesar Francisco, 2016.*

For the activity, all external bars were secured with padlocks by the security agents, perhaps even excessively. Two iron gates separated us from the rest of the staff, effectively trapping the researchers and one social educator in the ward, in direct contact with the young people waiting to be released for soccer. While the social educator unlocked the cell padlocks, we distributed game shirts and engaged in natural conversation with the adolescents.

The execution of this activity was a unique and very hopeful moment for future joint pedagogical initiatives, leading to substantial improvements in the less tedious environment of the living and educational conditions within this socio-educational unit. It increasingly became possible to unite the staff, the adolescents, and their families on the path of common life during institutionalization. To celebrate, we organized the first gathering in the form of a party.

A collective lunch was prepared, featuring music, recitations, and the reception of families and judicial authorities, all facilitated by a youth collective. The party was a success, with the adolescents becoming more restrained and responsible.

Despite the initial apprehension and mistrust, the activities unfolded in an atmosphere of greater celebration and cooperation, paving the way for the introduction of more complex moments of freedom, such as access to schooling, promotion of scientific content, provision of technical services, family visits, external outings to theaters, lectures, restaurants, sports centers, and manual labor. It was a double victory.

The pursuit of a collective pedagogical organization aimed at bringing educational propositions closer to young people for human development, true equality through rational dialogue, study, unified work, commitment, intellectual independence, and the pursuit of desired freedom, seems obvious.



Figure 4. The first party gathering young people, their families, and the Unit's staff.

Source: Archives of Julio Cesar Francisco, 2016.

It is glaringly evident that the State's repressive mechanisms foster habits that stifle transformative education, demanding from us even greater strength, a committed and resilient engagement, to overcome the repressive system of the capitalist State from within.

Following these and many other experiences, such as the restructuring of the execution of measures involving restriction and deprivation of liberty with the creation of the Superintendency of the Socio-Educational System of the state of Ceará (SEAS), the socio-educational perspective, despite its technicist and limited scope, garnered more attention because of the failures of "carceral education".

Indeed, the political directives of the new SEAS leadership, in alignment with the Government of Camilo Santana and continued by that of Elmano de Freitas, both of the PT, primarily adopted a technicist approach, in concert with repressive and business-oriented strands, culminating in the adoption of a pedagogical approach of competences to guide new life projects. The business ideology deeply entrenched itself as a destructive force within education.

As a result, the quality and socially relevant education, particularly that provided by public schools, remained disconnected from pedagogical practice during the implementation of detention measures. SEAS effectively distanced the school environment from the adolescents.

Contrary to expectations, after 10 years under the management of the PT government, the precarious conditions of the facilities, inadequate compensation for educators, technicians, and

administrative teams, as well as the disorganization of carceral education and the absence of professional education (highlighting the dichotomy between theory and practice), continued to prevail. This situation represented a dismal reality in the state of Ceará.

Thus, I believe that given the limited outcomes of the “new socio-educational management”, we are far from establishing solid and definitive foundations to surmount the repression of the bourgeois State, which dovetails with puerocentric constructivist discourses. This is reflected in the numerous conflicts and fatalities that occurred within the Juvenile Justice System of the state of Ceará in 2021 and 2022.

Moreover, managers must move beyond technical-productivist, constructivist, business-oriented, New School (*Escola Nova*), and Christian-humanist educational proposals, as well as practices of restorative justice and peace circles. These methodologies only serve the interests of capital, aiming to develop socio-emotional skills and competences among the impoverished as a means to mask class violence.

Currently, juvenile offenders are becoming increasingly detached from a complete education, progressively being excluded from public schools. The institution meant for these youths has ceased to fulfill its role in the socialization of knowledge. Instead, SEAS has begun to create a space that is both affective and humanized for the development of life projects aimed at the labor market, in collaboration with corporate foundations, attempting to obscure the issues of violence, infractions, and conflicts in socio-educational units.

Managers are trying to promote a constructivist approach in education, utilizing updated discourses spread through mass media. However, their pedagogical strategies remain precarious and opportunistic, focusing on the development of socio-emotional skills and competencies. This socio-educational policy has led to a decrease in the number of teachers, a reduction in teaching time, and a simplification of school content, revealing a significant pedagogical farce that needs to be exposed.

Scientific, artistic, and philosophical knowledge has been relegated to a secondary role, deemed unnecessary for the popular groups who are now directed towards practical activities due to the challenges of integration and permanence in the labor market, thus taking on an increasingly greater responsibility for themselves.

These bourgeois ideologies are examples of the various Trojan horses placed at the doors of educational institutions and incorporated into the Juvenile Justice System. This is not only the case in the state of Ceará, which is emblematic but also in several units of the federation.

It is essential to fight for the proper training and recognition of all socio-educational professionals, in order to strengthen educational actions in school, with seriousness and orientation toward an intellectually rigorous pedagogical approach (Sève, 1964; Rochex, 2015). This requires a transformative pedagogical commitment within the sphere of Juvenile Justice, moving beyond the harmful influences of the market, the church, and the state.

The dominant pedagogies utilize repressive, reproductive, traditional, technicist, and business ideas, sometimes lacking in planning, methodological clarity, and didactics, and employing the State's legitimate monopoly on coercive force to control the adolescents. These eclectic methods serve the power elites (businessmen, military, judges, religious leaders) who set the norms for the operation of punitive environments.

It is urgent to move beyond this automatism in the execution of punishment, towards a new, combative, and strengthened educational relationship, overcoming the state of ignorance and social isolation to which the youth are subjected. Ignorance is indeed both a tool and a victim of violence.

Furthermore, the spontaneous subversion of adolescents against the prison-repressive model is recurrent and has been gaining strength through violent revolt movements (escapes, threats, rebellions, murders), as a consequence of the selectivity and intensified marginalization by the juvenile carceral system, which has particularly denied access to rigorous, high-quality academic instruction for adolescents.

Even before educators or socio-education professionals begin working with the adolescents, it is necessary to understand this structure and the obstacles of this juvenile penal model, and gradually create spaces for freedom, reflection, movement, and awareness for the youths, equipping them with classical knowledge, which represents an elaborate synthesis of history, knowledge, and philosophical consciousness. This involves a pedagogical initiative to provide access to advanced forms of literacy and scientific knowledge, and thus to reflective and critical thinking about the world:

Transitioning from common sense to philosophical awareness involves moving from a fragmented, incoherent, disjointed, implicit, degraded, mechanical, passive, and simplistic conception to a unified, coherent, articulated, explicit, original, intentional, active, and cultivated one. (Saviani, 2007, p. 2)

In this setting, pedagogical action requires taking a proactive stance in addressing complex situations and seeking alternatives to the repressive and de-schooling models of bourgeois educational proposals, including socio-emotional education, low-level intellectual instruction, and pedagogies of “learning to learn”, which systematically tend to restrict intellectual development and reproduce social inequalities. It must be driven by a clear commitment to instruct the adolescents and to ensure their appropriation of systematized knowledge, requiring enlightened pedagogical leadership from the educators. This involves forming a bond based on equality and shared responsibility while expecting discipline from the students during the learning journey. Such an approach demands strict dedication from the young people to themselves throughout the socio-educational process (Sève, 1964; Rochex, 2015).

Indeed, the disciplinary relationship must possess an authority that earns respect, establishes boundaries, fosters open dialogue, and reflects a pedagogical practice of mutual respect, aiming to surmount indolence, lack of discipline, and the daunting language typical of criminal customs, endemic to the delinquent culture.

Observations and experiences demonstrate that pedagogical authority must be exercised by educators, as the development of autonomy and self-organization in young people’s learning depends on deliberate guidance and structured instruction, rather than emerging spontaneously. This approach avoids “make-believe” education, which merely occupies time and individualizes learning, supplanting the role of school and cultural mediations (Terrail, 2024; Bonnéry, 2025).

A critical and deliberately open exchange between educators and students can carve out opportunities to navigate past the obstacles of poor behavior and apathy towards the educational pathways of daily institutional life.

The strategy involves offering sophisticated and relevant teaching, considering popular culture and even the traces of criminality that have shaped the tumultuous identities of the adolescents, so that these elements of real life can act as a cultural scaffold for guiding pedagogical efforts towards achieving awareness, as well as theoretical and practical skills in the students' lives, marking a transformative moment for the consolidation of an intellectually rigorous pedagogy, turning them into proactive components for a liberating educational practice for the present and future generations.

Final Remarks

Upon entering the socio-educational unit and observing daily practices, the contradictions became starkly apparent. Conservative and traditional ideologies re-emerge, with social educators and adolescents entrenched in the repressive logic of the institutional structure, coexisting in ways detrimental to both their physical and mental health.

Given the degrading conditions, which are part of a historical continuum marked by rights violations, from the era of the State Foundation for the Welfare of Minors (FEBEM) to the present-day Educational Centers in the city of Fortaleza, widespread conflicts arise. These conflicts perpetuate objectives, content, values, and methods aligned with three foundational pedagogical approaches: Pedagogy of "learning to learn," Competence Pedagogy, and Repressive Pedagogy. These approaches are eclectically combined with educational practices, proving minimally preventive and lacking deliberate pedagogical intent.

Religious and popular knowledge is transmitted; however, it is also reinforced by discourses advocating competence and efficiency in addressing complex life problems, all within an environment characterized by repressive practices. This situation corroborates the trivialization of violence. Furthermore, the dilution of school education and the unsuccessful inclusion of restorative practice initiatives are evident, alongside the disproportionate use of police force in managing conflicts and rebellions.

It is important to note that this scenario in Ceará is not unique to the present moment but has developed and perpetuated over time, reflecting the influence of conservative collective forces, poor management, and underprepared teams, all of which contribute to control, coercion, and the erosion of formal education.

Concretely, the current model of juvenile accountability for offenses in Ceará is predictably headed towards chaos, torture, and further degradation of youth development, reducing school time, access to scientific knowledge, and opportunities for a dignified life for popular-class youth.

Thus, monitoring and coordinated action by social and popular sectors are urgently needed to counter the bourgeois proposals currently being implemented in socio-educational policy, not only in Ceará but nationwide.

The experiences presented in this study, offering both reflection and actionable insights for socialist pedagogy, lead to the following conclusions:

First, leaving young people to their own devices will lead to disordered, apathetic, rude, and violent behavior, both inside and outside the correctional setting.

Second, autonomy, freedom, critical awareness, and intellectual creativity are not inherent traits of the social subject, necessitating self-discipline, commitment, and the didactic-pedagogical

approach of teachers in the classroom and social educators in extracurricular instruction to cultivate these potentials from childhood.

Third, until the young learner has developed the conditions for self-discipline and self-organization in intellectual, moral, and social aspects, the teacher and social educator have the right and responsibility to establish boundaries for proper education, and if necessary, to mandate the completion of school tasks.

Fourth, education must dismantle the oppressive and authoritarian structures of incarceration, while avoiding individualism and de-schooling, aiming at explicit instruction through the appropriation of the cultural heritage bequeathed by previous generations. This approach emphasizes a unifying, balanced, and responsible engagement in the learners' home and educational environments, while valuing familial, school, and community ties.

Fifth, the primary goal of socio-educational measures should be to restore the fundamental rights of youth in conflict with the law, particularly the right to education as a common good, through the transmission and assimilation of knowledge historically developed by humanity, transformed into active elements for reflective and comprehensive thinking about the world, fostering truly emancipated individuals committed to the freedom and equality of all.

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