



Considering early childhood education teachers' perceptions of risk



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ABSTRACT

Because of violence, poverty, and inequality worldwide, teachers are increasingly working in high-risk situations. To support teacher development, education researchers can usefully study professionals in the field to understand their working environments. This paper presents theory, method, and findings to consider how teachers in the high-risk *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro understand risk. Based on narrative inquiry design and analysis, findings indicate that what appears to be avoiding reality, coping, or being resilient, comes into view as teachers' ways of narrating to mediate professional and community circumstances. We conclude with a discussion for ongoing research and practice.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Early childcare teachers as agents of change

Drawing on cultural-historical activity theory (Vygotsky, 1978), this study considers teachers at the center of activity-meaning systems for educational change as they work and reflect together. We consider teachers involved in an innovative training program as agents of change through their meaning-making activities, and discourse as a critical process where meaning develops, conflicts, and changes. Consistent with that definition, conversations about risk (and other aspects of the work environment) are collective social, political, and personal engagements with environments where teachers live and work.

1.2. Teachers narrate risk as an interpretive process

Risk is typically defined as a factor in the world, imposed on individuals, and internalized by them. Risk is associated with objective factors, like living in the midst of events that threaten daily survival, like shootings, robberies, acts of vengeance, environmental collapse, and surveillance. Individuals in such situations are then deemed at risk for being damaged or for internalizing causes from environment. Much research deals with the personal effects of violence in terms of individual traits, like vulnerability, resilience, or responses like coping. From a cultural-historical approach, we posit, instead, that

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people interact with dangerous environments like more apparently normal ones by using capacities and tools like language (Daiute, 2010).

When assuming the engagement of human goals and capacities rather than their reduction to individual traits or psychosocial reactions, researchers can shift their focus to participants' authorship, in this case, teachers in the fields of infant education and development (Vasconcellos, 2011; Wallon, 2008).

Integrating principles from cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978) and language use theory (Nelson, 1996), we define "agents of change" as those persons in pivotal positions of interaction within broader activity-meaning systems (Daiute, 2010). The theoretical principle that individuals and society develop inter-dependently via their meaning-making activities requires a participant who mediates powerful policy directives local practices and daily work activities.

Children, families, educators, and others in situations like *favelas* are similarly situated in public discourse that imposes images on them. Therefore, understanding how teachers working in dangerous environments understand them can offer insights into the dynamics of a social system. While outsiders perceive the risks and dangers of *favelas* as internalized by people living and working there, how do those whose public roles, like teachers, make sense of the social-ecology of the place? Related to this critical stance has been an increasing call for research eliciting the voices of insiders, especially those with the least status, such as children, teachers, and researchers: "The question of how teachers, administrators, and students produce meaning, and whose interest is served, is subsumed under the imperative to master the 'facts'. The script is grim" (Giroux, 1988, p. 2).

Research methods with narrative and other qualitative expressions often further reduce insiders' perspectives by sampling them as though they are individual, authentic, and stable, rather than relational, flexible, and complex (Daiute, 2010, 2011, 2012). A narrative approach requires ongoing development, in particular to shift from the common value of narrating as a personal or interpersonal process to one that is the enactment of dynamic contentious socio-political relations. In an attempt to avoid reducing teachers' narratives, we present theory and method considering how teachers in objectively dangerous contexts, narrate their experience in relation to social structures and new goals.

1.3. Child and society development in Rio de Janeiro

The municipality of Rio de Janeiro decided in 2007 to open a selection process for under-qualified professionals (degree required was middle school) to work with very young children in high-risk areas (*favelas*), in order to account for many children in need of support in these areas. We refer to these professionals as "teachers' aides," although they actually worked as the main teachers in infant care activity rooms. These young adults are undergoing constant changes in different areas of development: social, emotional, and cognitive, so a training and research program was created to understand and support that process.¹ Since 2009, Vasconcellos' research has been engaged with children and teachers in five nursery schools (locally known as *crèches*) serving children age 6 months – 3 years of residents in *favelas* or working class communities in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

The city has a population and a culture reflecting a unique history and ecology of incredibly diverse groups. While upper and middle class residents, overwhelmingly from European backgrounds, live in districts with modern conveniences, *favelas* are likely to be overwhelmingly inhabited by Afro-descendants (as blacks are identified in Brazil) and poor whites. In the past sixty years, the city also has received in great numbers internal mestizo migrants from the Northeastern states of Brazil. Rio de Janeiro celebrates such diversity, yet the conditions of inequality continue to spawn biases related to race, gender and poverty status, among others, affecting teachers and the teaching profession, which is so important for social change and development. For these reasons, teaching in the *favelas* is a pivotal process of social change, societal, and individual development.

1.4. The favela context

Favelas are contexts of major political, economic, and social change, in some ways characteristic of urban areas globally and yet unique in its history, structure, and everyday detail.

The *favelas* are slums outside of the official political-economic structure of society.² As such, they have lately been undergoing the process of "pacification", that is, the police force is entering these high-risk areas in an attempt to minimize trafficking and criminal action.³ As a result, schools in these areas are changing as well. Population statistics in 2010 recorded that of the 6,305,279 inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro, 1,092,476, about one sixth, were living in *favelas* (IBGE, 2000). As a result of decades of activism on behalf of children, Rio has a large early childhood public education system, encompassing 275

¹ The research program at NEI titled "Enfim Professores na Creche! Como se constrói uma Pedagogia para a Infância Carioca?" (At last teachers in nursery schools! How to construct pedagogy for Carioca Children? Note: the word carioca refers to residents born in Rio de Janeiro.)

² The term "favela" was first used during the Canudos War (1896–1897), when a small town called Canudos was constructed on a hill top close by to the Favela Hill, which was thus named after the indigenous plant that covered the hill. By the 1920s, all temporary housings built on hill tops were designated favelas.

³ Pacification Units, or in Portuguese, UPP – Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora, an initiative by the current state government of Rio de Janeiro to invade the favelas that are dominated by drug lords, imprison them, and "bring peace" to them by keeping the Police guarding the entrances and exits.

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