IMPACT OF TEACHING IN CONFLICT ZONES ON EDUCATORS' WELL-BEING AND PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES IN RIO DE JANEIRO

by

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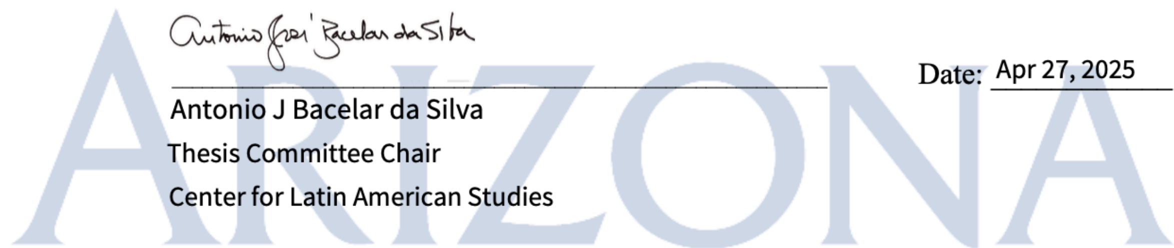

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Abstract

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, violence between criminal groups and state actors often erupts without warning, leaving teachers and students caught in the crossfire. In this qualitative study, I sought to understand the experiences of educators working in conflict zones located in North and South Zone favelas. This research analyzes the experiences of educators, the impact of armed conflict on their well-being and that of their students, and their pedagogical strategies in response to violence. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation at educational nonprofits in Rio de Janeiro highlighted several themes, including the unpredictability of violence, the favela as a war zone, self-sacrifice, trauma, the normalization of violence, and resilience. The educators described several coping strategies to manage the psychological toll of armed conflict and employed a range of strategies in their attempt to help students navigate their traumas. While Rio de Janeiro's perpetual state of exception forces some educators to teach in unbearable conditions where violence is an ever-present threat, they still use the potentiality of the classroom as a way to navigate and reconstitute the possibility of hope for their students. In this sense, the classroom becomes a site of resistance. This thesis addresses a gap in the literature regarding the perspectives of educators in conflict zones and contributes to a broader understanding of how they exercise their agency in the classroom despite structural barriers and urban violence in Latin America.

Introduction

In 2019, nearly three-quarters of public schools in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, had been exposed to armed conflict (Cruz et al., 2022). In most of these cases, the violence was not a one-time event: 57% of affected schools had at least 10 shootouts nearby, while 11% had been in proximity to more than 30 shootouts that year alone (Cruz et al., 2022).

While armed conflict may begin on the streets, the neighborhood itself turns into a warzone. Schools are meant to be safe—off limits—but this designation presents a tactical advantage for the criminals or police who choose to engage in warfare from within the building. Schools then may also become a target, because educators may be perceived as aiding the enemy. How can educators create a safe space for their students when the school itself may be the site of trauma?

Rio de Janeiro has a uniquely unstable public security situation due to the confluence of criminal groups and state actors who compete for power and resources. Violence erupts due to factors such as police operations, disputes about territory, or fights over the drug or arms trade. Drug traffickers have been working as organized networks in favelas since the 1980s (Arias, 2006). In the late 2000s, paramilitary groups known as *milícias* (militias) emerged as a major crime presence as well. Both of these groups are subdivided into different factions with ever-changing alliances and rivalries. The police launch wide-scale operations against all criminal groups, oftentimes with the assistance of militarized tactical units in shocking displays of violence (Robb Larkins, 2015).

Students who live in favelas or periphery neighborhoods have a higher risk of being affected by this armed conflict while in school. In the absence of meaningful actions from the state to ensure the safety of children, this immense (and impossible) responsibility falls on

individual educators. In this study, I sought to understand educators' experiences with violence and the way they modified their classroom strategies to make children feel safe at school. Their responses help to address a gap in the literature regarding the perspectives of educators in active conflict zones while also contributing to a greater understanding of the ways that individuals exercise their agency despite structural barriers and urban violence in Latin America.

Background

Understanding the present-day violence in Rio de Janeiro first requires a historical lens that considers the layers of social inequalities spanning centuries. Residential segregation and educational disparities contribute to unequal outcomes for children living in favelas or periphery neighborhoods. Armed conflicts in Rio de Janeiro tend to take place in low-income or working-class areas, severely disrupting the education of the local schoolchildren—many of whom are Black and Brown (Valente & Berry, 2022). As a result of this violence, the residents who live in these neighborhoods are often criminalized. For example, favela tour guides have been known to cast suspicion on children by claiming they only play with kites to send messages to drug traffickers (Robb Larkins, 2015). This notion, whether intentionally or unintentionally, serves to justify the existing disparities: If favela children are all "criminals," why should they deserve a high-quality education?

This section will highlight crucial information for understanding the unique sociopolitical context of Rio de Janeiro and its public education system.

The Geographical and Racial Landscape of Violence

Much of the violence impacting schools occurs in favelas or the peripheries, both of which are lower-class neighborhoods that have often seen an absence of state control. Favelas developed as a result of a lack of land or affordable housing (Farage, 2023; Perry & Caldeira,

2000). According to Farage (2023), the first favela in Rio de Janeiro was established in 1897. A common story about its origin says that soldiers from the Canudos War were promised land in exchange for their military service (Farage, 2023). The government did not fulfill its promise, so the soldiers decided to take a piece of land for themselves. The story says that the soldiers called the newly found neighborhood *Morro da Favella* in homage to a plant in Canudos that was able to survive despite the rough terrain. While some have debated the veracity of this story, it nevertheless highlights the resilience of residents who decided to build a home for themselves when limited options were available.

Several key factors led to the development of this city's first favelas: the law abolishing slavery in 1888, the 1903 decree outlawing tenements, and Brazil's rapidly growing role as an agricultural exporter (Farage, 2023). Despite being known as a racial democracy, Brazil had been a massive importer during the slave trade and was one of the last countries to outlaw slavery in 1888 (Telles, n.d.). Once slavery ended, a lack of housing for formerly enslaved people resulted in the rise of auto-constructed houses on unused land (Robb Larkins, 2015). In the 1800s, Rio de Janeiro began to experience a population boom and a housing crisis (Ribeiro, 1996). Much of the construction at that time was focused on commercial and industry buildings, with little attention given to the need for housing (Ribeiro, 1996). Many working-class people moved to *cortiços*, or tenements, in the city center (Ribeiro, 1996). The presence of these residences was perceived as a barrier hindering the government from creating the ideal, European city, with wide avenues similar to that of Paris (Barbosa & Coates, 2021). Calling the *cortiços* sites of filth and disease, the Rio de Janeiro mayor Pereira Passos enacted an order in the early 1900s to completely eradicate them without giving the current residents alternative housing (Barbosa & Coates, 2021). This wide-scale displacement of more than 20,000 people, as well as the construction

frenzy that began shortly after, became known as *bota abaixo*, or “tear it down” (Barbosa & Coates, 2021). As their homes were destroyed, many people looked toward the surrounding hills and began constructing their homes there, thus creating some of the city’s earliest favelas (Valladares, 2019).

In contrast to favelas, periphery neighborhoods (or “subúrbios”) are low-income neighborhoods that were designed as part of the planned city (Perlman, 2010). Residents generally have official addresses and, at times, better infrastructure. However, these areas still suffer from a disproportionate lack of state resources. A report prepared for the 2024 G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro emphasized the need for both favelas and periphery neighborhoods to receive better public services, including health, public transportation, and education (Brasil, 2024). Manso (2020) noted that the social exclusion and limited state presence in periphery neighborhoods led to the rise of militias that sought to intervene and fill the gap.

In Rio de Janeiro, the residential spaces where people live not only determine the quality of resources they receive from the state but also shape the way they may be perceived by others. Favela residents are said to be *do morro* (from the hill), and residents living in wealthy areas are *do asfalto* (from the asphalt). The majority of the urban and rural poor tend to be nonwhite, while those living in wealthier areas tend to be White, resulting in residential segregation (Valente & Berry, 2022). Even though White and *pardo* (mixed-race) Brazilians live in favelas as well, their status as favela residents means they are often racialized as Black by the broader Brazilian society (Alves, 2018; Roth-Gordon, 2017). As Roth-Gordon (2017) explains, the favela conveys Blackness, and “Black” spaces are perceived as places that must be contained, hidden, or eliminated. One example of this occurred in 2009, when the Rio de Janeiro government released plans to construct 9 miles of walls and encircle 19 favelas (Channel 4 News, 2009).

The perception of favelas as illegitimate spaces justifies the lack of rights or provision of consistent, high-quality public services. Because favelas developed outside government regulation, many politicians have considered them to be removed from the city and, therefore, not their responsibility (McCann, 2014). Favelas never appeared on city maps until the 1970s (Perlman, 2010). Just 10 years ago, Google Maps depicted Rio de Janeiro favelas as blank expanses of gray space, and community residents had to organize to make their communities visible (Luque-Ayala & Maia, 2018).

Some even refer to Rio de Janeiro as the *cidade partida*, or the divided city (Ventura, 1994). Perlman (2005) rebuked what she called the "myth of marginality" and argued that favelas, along with their residents, have been integral to the growth and functioning of Rio de Janeiro. She explained,

> [Favela residents] contribute their hard work, their high hopes, and their loyalties, but do not benefit from the goods and services of the system. Although they are neither economically or politically marginal, they are exploited . . . although they are neither socially nor culturally marginal, they are stigmatized and excluded from a closed class system. (Perlman, 2010, p. 150)

Many middle-class or wealthy Brazilians depend on the services provided by workers who live in favelas, and politicians often enter favelas to seek votes but will abandon the residents when it comes time to repay their promises (Perlman, 2010). The cultural contributions arising from favelas, such as samba, are integrated into the larger narrative of Brazilian culture and promoted abroad (Perlman, 2010). However, these resources often do not receive recognition, nor are they adequately compensated.

Despite the interconnection between *o morro* and *o asfalto*, many still take the approach of the divided city. The notion of favelas as belonging outside the city means the events that occur within its boundaries are believed to happen *elsewhere*. Through the construction of

favelas as uniformly violent spaces, the war-like police operations are legitimized as just and necessary to maintain the image of control. Thus, the city is actively at war with itself. Caught in the crossfire are educators and students living in favelas and peripheries who, due to a long history of residential segregation, are often confined to these spaces designated for violence.

Criminal Networks

The lack of formal state presence allowed some criminal groups to enter and establish control. Many favelas are controlled by drug traffickers or militias. The present-day drug trafficking factions in Rio de Janeiro were said to have had their roots in the military dictatorship (1964–1985). During the 1970s, both criminals and political prisoners were held together in a prison on Ilha Grande, an island a few hours away from the city. The two groups learned from each other. From the guerillas, the criminals learned how to organize and fight for their rights, eventually creating prison gangs (Arias, 2006). The Comando Vermelho (Red Command), a powerful drug trafficking faction, was formed there. Upon leaving the jail, the criminals applied what they had learned to build power, fund their illegal activities, and expand their operations (Arias, 2006).

Militias, on the other hand, are said to stem from the *justiceiros* (vigilantes), *grupos de extermínio* (extermination groups), and *esquadrões de morto* (death squads) of the mid-20th century (da Silva Conceição, 2015; Manso, 2020). Whether acting individually or in groups, these actors hunted and killed “criminals” and were publicly applauded by business owners and politicians for their efforts, especially in Baixada Fluminense, Rio de Janeiro (da Silva Conceição, 2015; Manso, 2020). The present-day militias are paramilitary criminal factions that include former (or current) police officers, firefighters, members of the armed forces, and more. Though militias extort favela residents and engage in violence, their connections with

government and public institutions have led some to argue that their actions may be tolerated or overlooked by the state (Lessing, 2018). "Paramilitaries, by positioning themselves as the lesser of two evils, are often able to avoid the brunt of state repression" (Lessing, 2018, p. 78). Alves, a scholar who studied these groups for decades, was blunter about their influence: *"A milícia é o Estado,"* the militia *is* the state (Simões, 2019). As of 2022, militias controlled more than 57% of the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan area, while drug traffickers controlled approximately 15% (Grupo de Estudos dos Novos Ilegalismos, 2022).

However, describing the exact role of the state in favelas requires nuance. Arias (2006) observed that some have erroneously claimed that favelas have existed without any state presence. The violent police operations are vivid examples of the state's presence and its role as a perpetrator of violence. The author noted that the state has intervened in other manners as well, especially if it was perceived as receiving a political or financial advantage. Examples include corrupt police officers selling their weapons to drug traffickers for money or receiving bribes to loan official police trucks for moving drugs (Arias, 2006). While these actions do not illustrate positive examples, they still show that it would be incorrect to consider the state completely absent from favela operations. They also demonstrate that the state does not exist separately from drug trafficking but, at times, actively facilitates it.

Another example of state intervention is the police entering favelas to conduct raids or search for a particular criminal. The presence of schools, public health clinics (Unidades de Pronto Atendimento [UPAs]), affordable housing projects, trash pick-ups, and other services in some favelas also illustrate a certain level of state involvement (Arias, 2006). However, the public institutions tend to be overcrowded, and the buildings often suffer from years of neglect.

Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora

In 2008, the state formally attempted to regain control of Rio de Janeiro favelas through the *Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora* (UPP) program, in which they invaded pre-determined favelas, attempted to drive out the drug traffickers, and set up 24-hour watch via the newly established UPP stations. The stated goal of the UPP program was to create a new model of public safety that would enhance relationships between police officers and community members (Leite et al., 2018). The program intended to reclaim the territory owned by criminal groups and prepare the area to receive public and private services for residents (Leite et al., 2018). For example, promotional material showed illustrations of UPP police officers opening up a newly pacified favela to let in teachers, doctors, and other public service workers to finally "civilize" the neighborhood and link it to the rest of the state (Leite et al., 2018). The "pacifications"—police invasions of the chosen favelas—were massive media events, with TV stations playing the image of fleeing criminals on a loop.

I taught in a favela that had been touted as one of the success stories of the pacification program, and the drug traffickers had very much remained. Moreover, after the 2016 Olympic games in Rio de Janeiro, the UPP presence slowly seceded, creating a power vacuum that outside criminal organizations attempted to capitalize upon. What followed was a series of long-term power struggles between various criminal groups, the police, and (at times) the military in extreme displays of violence.

The Private Security Boom

As crime rates have skyrocketed, many Rio de Janeiro residents have felt disillusioned with the ability of police officers to control the situation. Distrust of police is high throughout Brazil in general (Aransiola et al., 2021). In 2023, there were 39,500 intentional homicides in

Brazil, yet of six states with the highest homicide rates, five had statistically more military police than the national average (O Globo, 2024). Although crime is a complex phenomenon, adding more police did not seem to make a difference in terms of homicide rates (O Globo, 2024). Moreover, trust in public institutions, such as law enforcement, declines when people are victims of crime, live near gang-controlled territory, or feel unsafe in their own neighborhoods (Solar, 2022). In Rio de Janeiro, many wealthy neighborhoods share an uneasy border with favelas.

The fear of crime and lack of faith in police are major reasons why Brazilians have decided to invest in private security (Aransiola et al., 2021; Robb Larkins, 2023). In Caldeira's (2000) book *City of Walls,* her wealthy São Paulo participants conveyed fears about the public security situation through their persistent "talk of crime." Through these repeating narratives, the participants' anxiety about crime deepened, causing them to desire more security (Caldeira, 2000). Aransiola et al. (2021) observed that the more security measures that residents seek, the more fearful they become about the outside world, resulting in a reciprocal relationship between fear and security. Thus, cities like São Paulo become fortified and divided by walls (Caldeira, 2000). However, walls and other security measures can also be interpreted as physical manifestations of a perceived social hierarchy, marking strict lines between White and Black space. As Robb Larkins (2023) observed, the boom in private security preserves a social order in Rio de Janeiro and further entrenches racial segregation.

Due to the city's precarious public safety situation, middle-class parents often make significant investments in private services to ensure the safety of their children, such as living in fenced-off condominiums patrolled by security guards or enrolling their children in private schools (Roth-Gordon, 2017). Families who are unable to afford these expensive services must then rely on the public security and public education provided by the state. However, it is

common to hear harsh criticism leveled against parents who had to enroll their children in public schools, as they may be perceived as putting both their children's physical safety and future prospects at risk.

History of Brazil's Education System

Public school students represent one group that has often been caught in the middle of the ongoing violence between criminal factions and the state. Historically, this is not the only challenge that these students face in their effort to secure their right to an education. The public education system in Brazil has been grounded in inequality since its creation. In the colonial period (from 1500 to 1822), the Jesuits established schools and higher education institutions solely for members of the elite society (Weller & Neto, 2020). The first Brazilian constitution in 1824 mandated free education for all citizens, but citizenship was dependent on the color of one's skin—Black people and former slaves were not considered citizens even if they had bought their freedom (Weller & Neto, 2020). Education was still designed for children of the upper class until the 1930s. In 1934, the Ministry of Matters of Education and Public Health was formed and promoted the National Plan of Education to coordinate all levels of education across Brazil; in theory, all Brazilians now had a right to free primary school (Weller & Neto, 2020). However, 30 years later, a staggering number of children were still not enrolled: approximately five million students remained without an education in 1964 (Weller & Neto, 2020).

Free and mandatory schooling was expanded to 8 years in the 1967 constitution, but there were no initiatives to expand school infrastructures or invest in the professional development of teachers—as a result, many teachers only had the same level of education equal to the level at which they taught (Weller & Neto, 2020). For example, in 1981, 36% of teachers working in the Northeast only had an elementary education (Weller & Neto, 2020).

In Rio de Janeiro, urban expansion outpaced the capacity of public schools, and there was often not enough space for the enrollment of children from favelas (McMann, 2014). In response, class sizes were increased, and schools were split into two shifts (McMann, 2014). Although Governor Chagas Freitas hired thousands of new teachers, inflation in the 1970s caused their salaries to decline (McMann, 2014). The teachers attempted to sustain themselves by working at two different schools, but they quickly became exhausted, leading to teacher absenteeism (McMann, 2014). By the early 1980s, middle-class students started leaving the public school system in droves, and the school day had been further divided into three shifts with less than 4 hours of academic instruction at a time (McMann, 2014).

Leonel Brizola, who took over as governor after Chagas Freitas and saw Brazil enter a new phase following the dictatorship, attempted to strengthen public education (McMann, 2014). He hired Darcy Ribeiro as the Secretary of Special Projects and granted him the ability to develop a parallel school system (McMann, 2014). Riberio created the Centros Integrados de Educação Pública (CIEPs), intended to be a new model of public education. The goal was for students to attend school from 7:30 am–5:30 pm, eat three meals a day, and participate in cultural and recreational activities (McMann, 2014). Public school teachers led protests over the CIEPs in 1986, arguing that their expensive construction and high wages had taken money away from existing schools (McMann, 2014). Despite this controversy, more than 500 CIEPs were ultimately created and intentionally constructed near favelas (McMann, 2014). In the 1990s, the Centros Integrados de Apoio à Criança (CIACs) followed the CIEP program as a national initiative, and other educational initiatives followed, to varying degrees of success.

Contemporary Public Education System

The present-day Brazilian education system has been greatly impacted by the education law passed in 1996 by former President Cardoso, which allocated more funds to primary and secondary education (Reiter, 2009). The new law led to changes in guidelines for a national curriculum, expanded programs to support schooling for economically disadvantaged children, and implemented affirmative action policies at several universities (Reiter, 2009). As a result, enrollment improved: 97% of children attended school in 2000, an increase of 12% over 11 years (Reiter, 2009).

Despite this progress, children of a lower socioeconomic class in Brazil are at a significant disadvantage at every step of their educational journey. While preschool is free, there are limited spaces, and many children aged 4 to 5 do not attend; in 2019, 384,475 preschool students were out of school (UNICEF, 2021). Public school at the primary and secondary levels is still held for less than 5 hours per day, and class is often canceled due to a lack of resources: no teachers, no electricity, or no water.

Moreover, while many CIEPs and CIACs still operate, others have become abandoned and have fallen into disrepair. In Complexo da Maré, a complex of favelas in Rio de Janeiro, a CIAC sank into the ground due to poor infrastructure, and a CIEP had to close for renovations, sending over 800 students to just one municipal school in 2019 (Cezar, 2022). Despite the admirable goals of the educational initiatives, they were plagued by the same deeply rooted issues that continue to impact Brazil's public schools today, such as overcrowding, poor infrastructure, and lack of funds. Students' academic performance suffers as a result.

Student performance on national assessments has sparked worldwide concern. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) conducts assessments to

gauge student performance internationally, and the last Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was in 2022. Brazil's PISA scores in 2022 indicated significantly lower-than-average scores in reading, math, and science (OECD, n.d.-c). However, these scores combine the performance of both public and private school students. In an analysis of 2018 PISA scores, Neumann (2022) observed a significant difference in performance between private and public school students. Brazil's private school students had high performance similar to that of wealthy countries like Portugal (Neumann, 2022). In contrast, public school students have been found to perform worse across a variety of subjects, and the difference in performance between public and private school students in mathematics was one of the greatest disparities measured in the 2022 PISA (OECD, n.d.-a). In an analysis following the 2012 PISA results with similar inequalities, the OECD (n.d.-b) noted that Brazilian students in private schools demonstrated higher test scores even when controlling for socioeconomic status; their educational experience (better infrastructure, better resources, qualified teachers, and low student-to-teacher ratios) was determined to be major factors in their success. The results indicated that children of varying socioeconomic statuses are more than capable of succeeding academically, but structural barriers often impede public school students from reaching their full potential. One significant example is that of local armed conflict, which not only disrupts instructional time but also makes it exceedingly more difficult for a child to learn at school.

Armed Conflict and Education

In Rio de Janeiro, violence has been a persistently disruptive force in education. The number of school closures due to armed conflict surpassed the 2022 data before 2023 had even ended. From January to early October 2023, there were 2,259 closures, affecting 176,000 students and representing more than a 6% increase from 2022 (Galdo et al., 2023). The Rio de

Janeiro government has been wrangling with this issue for decades and has taken little action. In 2010, the government debated bulletproofing 200 schools in conflict zones after an 11-year-old student was killed by a stray bullet from a police operation (Phillips, 2010). A teacher union leader begged for small changes, such as suspending operations during school hours, to no avail (Phillips, 2010).

International groups have sounded the alarm. The International Committee of the Red Cross (2022) has tried to establish safer conditions for 534 public schools. However, the efforts of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been insufficient to keep schools safe. Schools may not receive information to close in time, and police operations and gun battles between criminal factions still occur during school hours.

Literature Review

Given the well-documented impacts of exposure to violence, it is crucial to examine how these dynamics affect educators and students in conflict zones such as Rio de Janeiro. This section will contextualize their experiences by highlighting the consequences for academic performance, the broader health implications for school community members, and the role of trauma-informed teaching in these environments.

Impact on Academic Performance

Exposure to armed conflict has been proven to negatively impact students' academic progress in the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan area. One study found a positive correlation between crime rates and student drop-out rates in the city's public schools (Caldas Montes & Mendes, 2021). Children who were geographically located near armed conflict had a decline in math, and this impact was lessened as the distance increased (Monteiro & Rocha, 2017). Koppensteiner and Menezes (2019) similarly found that when homicides occurred within 25 meters of a school,

math test scores dropped by 2.3 points and Portuguese scores dropped by 2.1 for Brazilian students. Conflict intensity and duration exacerbated the impacts on academic performance (Monteiro & Rocha, 2017).

These findings align with the results of similar studies conducted in different Latin American countries. For instance, Rodríguez and Sánchez (2012) analyzed the impact of armed conflict on the educational achievement of students in Colombia, a country that faced conflict between the government and guerrilla and paramilitary groups. Their study indicated that students living in areas with a higher rate of violence were more likely to drop out of school, especially beginning at age 11 or after (Rodríguez & Sánchez, 2012). Similarly, León (2012) studied the impact of political violence on children's academic performance in Peru, a country that faced civil conflict between its army and the Maoist rebel group, Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), resulting in nearly 70,000 deaths. The author found that children who were exposed to violence during this time had a higher risk of school dropping out of elementary or secondary school (León, 2012).

Researchers have also analyzed the impact of neighborhood violence on children's academic progress in U.S. schools. A systematic review of articles focusing on community violence and educational outcomes found numerous studies from cities with higher rates of community violence, such as Baltimore, New York City, and Chicago (Chávez & Aguilar, 2021). In Baltimore, for instance, a one-point increase in neighborhood violence led to 4.2% and 8.7% decreases in test scores for math and reading respectively (Chávez & Aguilar, 2021). Moreover, on average, classes with high proportions of children from violent neighborhoods in Chicago performed poorly, negatively impacting the performance of classmates who did not live in violent neighborhoods as well (Burdick-Will, 2018). The author speculated that children exposed

to violence may be disruptive or distracted in class, which then affects their peers (Burdick-Will, 2018).

While the research from other Latin American countries and the United States provides insight regarding the issues faced by children in Rio de Janeiro, the differences must be noted. Rio de Janeiro is engaged in conflict between state actors and criminal groups; it is not in a civil war or experiencing a wave of resistance. The addition of the militias also serves as a contrast from violence inflicted from individuals or criminal groups in the United States. Moreover, the implicit approval that militias receive from the state creates a different relationship than the one existing between gangs and U.S. police forces (Lessing, 2018).

Impact on Mental and Physical Health

Living in poverty puts children at a higher risk of being exposed to dangers and stressors that can wreak havoc on their mental and physical health. Examples include noise, toxins, exposure to violence, substandard housing, malnutrition, and abuse (Blair & Raver, 2016; Kim et al., 2013). Exposure to these stressors have been linked to psychological challenges in adulthood and consequences for cognitive development (MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Research has found that poverty affects brain development as early as infancy (Blair & Raver, 2016). Children living in poverty had reduced gray matter volumes, and the volume was further reduced as socioeconomic status decreased (Hair et al., 2015).

Chronic stress has been linked to neurobiological changes as well. For example, the amygdala responds to environmental threats, such as by activating the body's fight-or-flight response (Kim et al., 2013). The prefrontal cortex regulates the amygdala, but exposure to chronic stress can impact its ability to function; as a result, the amygdala will play a larger role in responding to the environment (Arnsten et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2013). Children of a low

socioeconomic status have been found to have greater amygdala activity and reduced prefrontal cortex activity (Kim et al., 2013). Thus, they may respond in a more reactive and impulsive manner that is driven by stress and fear (Kim et al., 2013). Children with repeated exposure to chronic stress may struggle with attention, impulse control, communication, and working memory, all of which may impact their performance at school (MacLochlainn et al., 2022).

Similarly, exposure to violence can likewise lead to a decline in cognitive function, increased aggression, and poor mental health (Pritchard & Choonara, 2017). Worldwide, the World Health Organization has estimated that mental health issues afflict between 10% to 20% of children but has increased the percentage to 12% to 25% for Brazilian children (Avanci et al., 2021). Brazilian children growing up in urban contexts are vulnerable to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) not only due to exposure to violence but also to other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that may co-occur with poverty, such as abuse and food insecurity (Avanci et al., 2021).

Despite the body of research highlighting the devastating consequences of exposure to violence, children in favelas are often granted little empathy or even blamed if the violence inflicts consequences on their lives. They are expected to be strong beyond what is reasonable or even possible. Roberts (2017) commented upon the weaponization of resilience: “It does nothing to change structural inequalities and naturalizes certain groups as able to endure more” (p. 594). Because these children have endured thus far, they are expected to persevere without complaint.

In 2021, intense gunfights prohibited many residents of Complexo do Salgueiro, Rio de Janeiro, from leaving their homes. The Enem, similar to the SAT in the United States, was held that day, and more than 500 students were hindered from safely traveling to the testing location (Haidar, 2021). The students were not offered a different test day. Community members had to

demand it through protest. While they did ultimately win, the testing authorities had firmly expected the adolescents to travel to the testing center during the violent shootout and complete the long, rigorous test while listening to the sounds of bullets. The mental health and physical well-being of children growing up in favelas or peripheries continue to not be prioritized, and both parents and community members have to fight tirelessly for their rights.

Trauma-Informed Teaching

Many scholars have recognized the impact that trauma has on a child's development and academic performance (Monteiro & Rocha, 2017; Pritchard & Choonara, 2017). As a result, trauma-informed teaching was proposed as a way to meet the needs of traumatized students in school. Harris and Fallot published a book in 2001 that introduced the term *trauma-informed* when describing a range of services required to meet the needs of individuals who have endured trauma. The trauma-informed approach has since been incorporated across various fields, including education.

Trauma was first officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 and had been considered to be after someone had been exposed to an extremely distressing event that was not within the range of normal human experiences (Radow et al., 2025). PTSD, which refers to the onset of symptoms after the initial event, also became recognized as a disorder (Radow et al., 2025). Some of the symptoms of PTSD include nightmares, intrusive flashbacks or memories that relive the event, and feelings of detachment, sadness, or anger (American Psychiatric Association, n.d.).

Trauma-informed teaching involves a holistic approach that understands the impact that trauma can have on children and promotes awareness of trauma-based responses; as a result, the teacher can anticipate these responses and create a safe classroom environment for navigating

difficult emotions (Sweetman, 2022). Students learn socioemotional skills such as recognizing emotions, self-regulating, and engaging in mindfulness practices (Sweetman, 2022). Trauma-informed teaching can result in increased well-being of students and enhanced readiness to learn (Stokes, 2022).

Fallot and Harris (2001) developed several trauma-informed principles that educators can employ in their pedagogical choices: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. Safety is considered one of the crucial, fundamental levels in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Safety is the second level in the pyramid, appearing just above physiological needs. Safety refers to physical safety, health, stability, and secure attachments (Waltemire & Bush, 2020). As Stokes (2022) noted, "In order to support children to meet their needs for safety at school, teachers should be supportive, caring, and avoid acting in ways that might trigger the child and produce power-laden behavioral responses like bullying" (para. 8). The presence of routines and clear classroom expectations can give children a sense of safety through its structure and predictability. Students who have experienced trauma or chronic stress may feel at peace, as their fight-or-flight mode is not being activated (MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Thus, a safe classroom environment can allow students to better regulate their emotions.

Trustworthiness is another key principle of a trauma-informed approach. Children who have experienced trauma may struggle to form trusting relationships with others (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, n.d.). In a classroom, applying this principle may include the consistency, clear expectations, and appropriate boundaries (Carello, n.d.). Choice is the third trauma-informed principle, and giving students some choice allows them to exercise some control in the classroom. As a result, they may feel a growing sense of confidence and self-efficacy (Carello, n.d.). Collaboration, the fourth trauma-informed principle, may encompass

collaboration between students, educators, support staff, administrators, family members, and individuals from the broader community (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, n.d.). Empowerment is the final trauma-informed principle and involves the development of mastery and enhanced independent skills (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, n.d.).

Regardless of expertise in trauma-informed teaching or its principles, educators may instinctively engage in similar practices. One example is setting aside time for students to talk about their feelings, especially following a traumatic event in the community. Educators may also take measures to try to make their classroom feel like a *safe space*, which may be considered a place where children are protected from psychosocial harm and physical danger (Enskär et al., 2020). Children often have little to no control over their environment and require adults to keep them safe from environmental risks (Enskär et al., 2020). At school, a safe space is a classroom where children feel protected from emotional pain, psychological trauma, injury, or even death (Enskär et al., 2020). In Rio de Janeiro, the frequency of police operations and armed conflict means educators are often required to make in-the-moment decisions to try to protect their students; however, educators still have limited means to secure their classrooms in the midst of heightening levels of violence. Children continue to be shot from stray bullets while at school (Bianchi, 2017; Phillips, 2010).

Purpose of Study

In this research, I sought to understand educators' experiences with armed conflict and the pedagogical choices they made as a result. A qualitative study with the voices of educators in the middle of these conflicts could illustrate the human impact of exposure to violence and its long-lasting effects beyond the initial event. Schools are supposed to be a place of refuge where

children have their need for safety met, but how can educators cultivate a safe classroom environment in the middle of a conflict zone?

There is limited research centering the perspectives of educators on local violence or its impact on their teaching practices. Interviews with Brazilian educators are sometimes found in news articles following a conflict; typically, their responses are condensed into short quotes, although they are occasionally given space in qualitative studies. For example, Alves and Evanson (2011) published a book that contained interviews with a variety of groups affected by armed conflict in Rio de Janeiro, including parents, community leaders, and educators. In a group interview with five educators, the participants vividly described the way violence disrupted their classrooms but did not explore their pedagogical strategies in depth (Alves & Evanson, 2011). In her recent doctoral dissertation, Santos (2022) investigated the perspectives of Rio de Janeiro educators about the challenge of teaching in a conflict zone. The author provided important information regarding the struggles educators have faced—such as hiding from a shootout and having to teach immediately after it finishes—and mentioned their implementation of *pedagogia de emergência* (emergency pedagogy), which aimed to establish the school environment as a warm and comforting place for students who frequently witness violence (Santos, 2022). Emergency pedagogy is based on Waldorf education and aims to provide support for students in the acute phase immediately following a natural disaster or outbreak of violence (Center for Anthroposophy, n.d.). In contrast, trauma-informed teaching is a broader approach that can be applied in all educational contexts, with or without the presence of an immediate crisis. Both approaches nevertheless emphasize awareness and responsiveness for children suffering from trauma.

An initial review of the research has found qualitative studies centering on the perspectives of educators who teach in intense conflict zones. For example, in a survey of teachers working in Cameroon, 95.5% of them reported working in tense school environments, 95.2% reported a fear of being identified as a teacher, and 95.1% reported teaching in fear (Agbor et al., 2022). It should be noted that teachers and students in this country were targeted for kidnapping and execution (Agbor et al., 2022), contrasting their experiences from those in Rio de Janeiro who had been caught in the crossfire between other groups instead. Muthanna et al. (2022) also conducted a qualitative study in Yemen to analyze the experiences of teaching in an active war zone. In addition to a loss of dignity and the severe psychological toll of war, educators also reported immense challenges in supporting the physical and mental health of their students (Muthanna et al., 2022). A country at war presents a much different context than that of Rio de Janeiro, but similarities in the mental health struggles of educators can nevertheless still be noted, as well as the impossible challenge of trying to teach and protect all students. Overall, there has been limited research on teachers' perspectives regarding local armed conflict, and very little on the use of trauma-informed teaching in conflict zones.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill the gap in the literature and uncover teachers' perspectives, experiences, and strategies in response to violence. The study also aims to illustrate the ways that people navigate structural barriers and exercise their agency in the face of seemingly impossible situations, thereby contributing to a greater understanding of responses to urban violence in Latin America.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are educators' experiences with armed conflict in Rio de Janeiro?

2. What is the impact of violence on the well-being of educators and students?
3. How do educators modify their pedagogical strategies in response to violence?

Methodology

I conducted this qualitative study during the summer of 2024 in favelas that have experienced conflict in Rio de Janeiro. The chosen favelas were home to established educational nonprofits offering supplemental education to children, offering a useful entry point for research. During my fieldwork, I volunteered as an English teacher for nonprofits in two different favelas. While this allowed for better integration and camaraderie with my participants, as a former teacher, I also just wanted to teach again. I hoped to contribute meaningfully and support the community members who offered so much of their time to speak with me. In addition to my volunteering responsibilities, I also attended all events, such as field trips, birthday parties, Festa Junina, and the children's art exhibitions at a gallery. I am thankful to have been invited and welcomed with open arms.

Several inclusion criteria guided eligibility for this study. Participants had to be Brazilian educators who delivered instruction or managed educational activities in an active conflict zone in Rio de Janeiro. *Educators* encompassed NGO teachers, directors of educational nonprofit organizations, and public school educational staff, including a teacher and a paraprofessional. Some participants taught at multiple locations or held different roles concurrently. Many of the directors taught classes as well. An area was defined as an *active conflict zone* if shootouts historically occurred and remained a present risk. Individuals were eligible to participate as long as at least one of their teaching positions was held in an active conflict zone. Participants affiliated with educational nonprofits were eligible if the organization was owned and directed by Brazilians. Participants also needed to be aged 18 years or older.

I used both observation and semi-structured interviews to collect data. Observation was chosen because of the opportunity to view educators' natural interactions with students. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because of their ability to elicit participants' perspectives, thoughts, beliefs, and emotions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In total, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 educators.

I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling for this study. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to match the sample to the objectives of the study (Campbell et al., 2020). The researcher uses their discernment to select individuals who have the necessary background, skills, or experiences to meaningfully contribute as participants (Campbell et al., 2020). While some may argue that purposive sampling may present the risk of bias, this sampling method allows a researcher to efficiently gather in-depth insights from participants, thus being beneficial for a study of a limited time and duration (Campbell et al., 2020). Snowball sampling uses a referral approach in which participants ask individuals within their network if they would be interested in participating in the study (Valerio et al., 2016). This sampling method has the benefit of expanding beyond the researcher's network to find additional participants who would meet the criteria for participation. The prospective participants have the autonomy to reach out to the researcher first, thus ensuring their privacy and autonomy.

I used purposive sampling for the participants I had already been professionally acquainted with through my past history as a volunteer teacher in Rio de Janeiro. I narrowed down prospective participants using the inclusion criteria. I informed these individuals about the study through WhatsApp or face-to-face during my fieldwork, and I asked them if they would like to voluntarily participate. Some participants connected me to additional educators, thus utilizing a snowball sampling approach.

Participants gave their informed consent before beginning any interviews. I explained that they could leave the study at any time without penalty, and they could skip any question they did not want to answer. Participants understood that if they decided to leave the study, I would delete any data gathered from their participation. Once they agreed, we began the interview. Some interviews were held in person, while others were held on Zoom or WhatsApp. With the participants' consent, I audio recorded their responses and developed transcriptions using Trint. Following the completion of the interviews, I analyzed the transcripts in search of common themes among responses.

Positionality

It was important for me to consider the impact of my positionality before, during, and after my study. I am a White, middle-class woman from the United States who speaks Portuguese as a second language. Everything I was learning from my participants was through the lens of an outsider. Sometimes we acknowledged our differences, and sometimes we left them unsaid, but they remained a constant presence between us regardless. I also felt the weight and responsibility of reporting my findings to an international audience; it needed to be done right. I am human, and I make mistakes, but I have worked very hard in hopes that this work will do justice to those who have given so much of their time and energy to speak with me. Throughout history, favela residents have been exoticized, criminalized, or dehumanized as the "other." I wanted to conduct this research with respect and honor their voices.

For this reason, I tried to take care with the translations of my participants' quotes. I met with Brazilian Portuguese professors, colleagues, and friends throughout the research process to review and re-review all of my translations and interpretations. I left the original Portuguese quotes to highlight the unique voices of each participant and allow for nuances that may

sometimes be lost during translation. Their words deserve to be read in their original, unaltered forms.

I acknowledge the aspects of my identity that have given me privilege while making me an outsider. However, there are other aspects of my identity that allowed me to bond with the educators. Before this study, I had worked for a decade in education, and some of my connections in these communities go back to 2014. I have worked as an educator and coordinator in different nonprofits operating in Rio de Janeiro favelas. Cumulatively, I have spent a quarter of the last decade living in Brazil, 18 months of which were in one South Zone favela where I established strong ties and long-lasting friendships. I also have several years of experience as an elementary school teacher in Brooklyn, New York. These experiences allowed me to commiserate with the educators while acknowledging the differences between our contexts. Our interviews were often warm and free-flowing conversations that ended up lasting longer than I anticipated. The strength and resilience of these individuals have moved me more than I can explain. But they should not have to be resilient; they should not be forced to endure conditions of normalized violence.

Organization

Chapter One analyzes educators' experiences with armed conflict in Rio de Janeiro, with participants indicating the presence of six themes: the unpredictability of violence, the favela as a war zone, self-sacrifice, trauma, the normalization of violence, and resilience. This chapter examines the impact of violence on the well-being of educators and their students. An initial review of the data has revealed a series of seemingly contradictory coping strategies: feeling numb, relying on religion, and expressing hope. This chapter argues that educators in conflict zones engage in a complex process of negotiating between trauma and resilience, two forces that

are not mutually exclusive: they experience both exhaustion and strength, as well as despair and hope. The educators in the present study navigate the tension between these two forces, wrangling with impossible situations to find and leverage the possible.

Chapter Two explores the educators' pedagogical choices in response to different forms of violence in the community: sensational violence, structural violence, and slow violence. The educators' strategies are described in this section and connected to the literature on trauma-informed teaching. This chapter argues that despite violence and structural barriers, educators use their agency to make choices that reconstitute the classroom as a place of hope.

The conclusion summarizes key takeaways, recommendations, and future directions for research. This section also provides updates on armed violence in Rio de Janeiro and final thoughts from both me and the research participants.

Conclusion

The prevalence of armed conflict in Rio de Janeiro is nothing less than a public health emergency and hinders children from obtaining their right to an education. Exposure to violence is devastating and continues to inflict psychological impacts long after the initial event. Generation after generation of schoolchildren are thus traumatized and retraumatized as adults. This phenomenon can especially be seen in the study participants who endured outbreaks of armed conflict not only as students but also as teachers once they became adults. Rio de Janeiro has existed in a permanent state of exception, with shocking levels of violence and disregard for human life. Because the safety of children can no longer be guaranteed, and public schools and NGOs tend to lack the private security afforded by the wealthy elite, some educators have attempted to fill that gap.

Interviews with educators have illustrated not just the emotional toll of this situation but also their resilience, resourcefulness, and strength as they work to keep children safe. Despite immense structural barriers and ever-present violence, educators still exercise their agency to leverage the potentiality of the classroom as a way to cultivate hope for their students. This study highlights the capacity for individuals to create hope out of impossibility and demonstrates how education can serve as a form of resistance.

While this study contributes to the larger body of literature on urban violence in Latin America, it is also especially relevant today, as educators worldwide have encountered increasingly insurmountable barriers to the delivery of a public education. These individuals may face different challenges and navigate work in vastly different environmental contexts, but they still negotiate a constantly changing educational landscape that devalues their work. Issues like disinvestment in public education, mistrust, censorship, lack of autonomy, and school shootings continue to intensify, while societal issues like poverty, inequality, and gun violence persistently disrupt their classrooms. Thus, this study may have lessons that go beyond the context of Brazil and shed light on how educators around the world respond to internal and external pressures that threaten their work with students.

Chapter One

During one of my first weeks of teaching at Abigail's NGO, I walked upstairs to see the children laying on the floor to paint their self-portraits. Her educational nonprofit sat at the top of a favela, requiring an unrelenting number of labyrinthine staircases to reach its front door. Upon entering, I was greeted with the sight of bright murals and small pairs of sandals scattered in the hall. Voices echoed across the tiled floors. The windows were cast open, and the waves of a distant beach made the wind smell faintly of rain and seawater. In the classroom, the children had their paint brushes ready. They had already drawn an outline of a silhouette facing forward to look at the viewer. All of them looked raptly at Abigail as she stood in front of an easel, illustrating how to measure the dimensions of a human being.

On the easel was the same silhouette that the children had drawn. Abigail lifted her pencil and bravely drew a line down its face, bisecting it. With a smooth flick of her hand, she drew a horizontal line, dividing the face into quarters. Then, she showed how to form the eyes in the middle, to level the ears with the eyes, and to draw a nose gently sloping downward. Her expert hand moved deftly across the page, and within seconds, the faceless figure had begun to take form. Some of the children followed along and began to jot sketches, while others simply watched her, mouth agape. A hush fell over the room, only broken by the scrawl of pencils.

I scanned my camera across the room to record the children's portraits, each of which had started to take shape and breathed a life of its own. When I finished recording, I jolted and tried to hide my sharp intake of breath. A drug trafficker was standing directly on the other side of the window, watching the children.

He was the *olheiro* (lookout) who had brought up a ratty beach chair to sit on the rooftop and gaze down at the favela below. I had seen him before, sitting near the ledge of the roof with a

walkie-talkie in hand, looking at the boundary where the *morro* met the *asfalto* and the road cascaded down into the sea.

Abigail saw him too. At once, she stopped drawing. “Close the windows,” she said.

One of the children, João[1], had not taken part in the activity. He looked at the students sitting near the windows and began to repeat that he could not join them, that he needed to do something else, *anything* else. Abigail designated him as her helper for the day, and for the next hour, he diligently painted her office a cheerful sky blue. Yet he was still on edge, his eyes darting toward the window.

Once we closed the school, Abigail and I walked down to the *asfalto* together. I was staying there; she was taking a bus to another favela. I always felt a gnawing sense of guilt when we parted ways.

“João talked with me. He’s not coming back this week.” She took a breath. “That trafficker is his older brother. They used to be close, but his brother ran away from home. Seeing him again—especially as a drug trafficker—was devastating. He feels sad, hurt, and embarrassed.”

Several beats passed. Then she looked at me. “If there was a police operation, the traffickers would make a beeline for the school. It would give them protection. Think about it: They can’t go up; we’re already on the roof. They can’t go down; that’s where the police would be. They would try to come in through the windows. We need to install bars immediately.”

Abigail secretly raised funds while planning the installation of bars and cameras. In the meantime, the traffickers let their presence be known. They tested their guns in rapid-fire bursts while the children were in class. They continued to take people into the woods behind the school to viciously beat them for any perceived betrayals. After Abigail installed bars on the windows,

[1] Names of all children have been changed for privacy.

she also renovated the roof above the classroom so it would stop crumbling during the heavy rainfalls. She celebrated this new renovation for less than one day. Then, she messaged me: "The traffickers have already taken it over as their new lookout." The criminals had fully encircled the school, from all sides to now *above* the children, on top of the project itself.

Abigail's story is just one of many examples in which criminals or state actors have physically invaded a school because of the tactical advantage provided to them. Such invasions put educators in the impossible decision of trying to keep children safe while still maintaining their own neutrality in this war. Moreover, this infiltration of violence hinders educators from cultivating a safe classroom environment. The school is not an island with impermeable boundaries separating it from the outside world; external forces continue to intrude, threatening both the academic progress and well-being of students. As a result, some students begin to avoid educational activities, as in the case of João.

The goal of this chapter is to explore the educators' lived experiences of teaching in a conflict zone and the ways that armed conflict has violently disrupted their pedagogical practices. These traumatic events have not only impacted the well-being of educators but also that of their students. Rio de Janeiro's perpetual state of exception means that educators are expected to teach under unbearable conditions, and despite the educators' efforts to protect them, children are still threatened by the presence of violence—whether it is an active police operation, gunshots in the distance, or an ever-present figure looming over them, walkie-talkie in hand. This chapter argues that educators in conflict zones continuously engage in a complex process of negotiating between trauma and resilience. While at first glance these forces may seem like opposites, they are not mutually exclusive. The participants' responses demonstrate both

exhaustion and strength, despair and hope—sometimes switching within the same train of thought. The educators navigate the tension between these two forces.

The experiences of 12 educators are described in this chapter. Table 1 below lists their pseudonyms and roles.

Table 1

Research Participants

	Pseudonym	**Role**
1	Abigail	Director of an educational nonprofit
2	Abrão	Director of a community center
3	Ci	Nonprofit educator
4	Douglas	Director of an educational nonprofit
5	Flor	Nonprofit educator
6	Henri	Public school paraprofessional and nonprofit educator
7	Lu	Director of an educational nonprofit
8	Maria	Public school teacher and nonprofit educator
9	Mia	Nonprofit educator
10	Ricardo	Nonprofit educator
11	Thaís	Director of an educational nonprofit
12	Yvonne*	Director of an educational nonprofit

Note. Yvonne Bezerra de Melo gave permission to use her real name for this study. This thesis will describe her unique brain-based, trauma-informed teaching approach, the Uerê-Mello pedagogy, which would include some identifying features of the director and her work.

Experiences With Violence

The majority of participants had experienced outbreaks of armed conflict during their teaching activities. Outbreaks of violence included intergang warfare or police operations. Many had witnessed armed conflicts in their daily lives as well. When asking the educators to share how armed conflict impacted their work, many asked me to clarify if I only wanted to hear about school, as they had numerous examples from their daily lives. A few participants had experienced this violence both as a student and a teacher, and they shared the perspective of each.

Ci and Flor were the two participants who had, thankfully, not experienced violence during their work as teachers. Each of them worked in the same favela, but they taught for different nonprofits one or two times a week. Several other participants also lived and worked in this same favela (Abrão, Henri, Maria, and Mia), but they spent more time engaged in teaching activities. For instance, Maria worked as a full-time public school teacher and taught for a community center three nights a week. Both of her roles required her to teach in conflict zones.

When educators described their experiences with armed conflict, six main themes emerged: unpredictability of violence, the favela as a war zone, self-sacrifice, trauma, the normalization of violence, and resilience. Altogether, their responses shed light on the ways they navigate between trauma and resilience, highlighting the way they manage the profound hardships inflicted by the state and structural barriers. Despite their impossible situations, they carve out small amounts of possibility and assert hope for a better future.

Unpredictability of Violence

Many participants, many of whom were favela residents, described the unpredictability of violence. Armed conflict could break out while teaching or while walking down the street.

Abrão, a director of a community center offering educational activities, discussed the constant feeling of waiting for the next shootout:

> Quando tem uma incursão . . . a gente suspende as atividades. . . . Depois volta quando acalma. . . . Mas sempre trazendo aquele trauma, né? Quando vai ser? Ou se vai acontecer? Entendeu? [A gente] se sente sempre com o pé atrás pra se preparar, pra quando acontecer a gente estar preparado, e sempre estar protegendo as crianças e quem está aqui, ne? Quem é refém dessa situação.
>
> When there is a raid . . . we suspend our activities. . . . Then we return when things calm down. . . . But always bringing that trauma, right? When will it happen? Or will it happen? [We are] always careful to be prepared, so that when it happens, we are prepared and are always protecting the children and those who are here, right? Who are held hostage to this situation.

Even when classes have resumed, there is no sense of normalcy. Abrão and his staff enter work each day with a sense of wariness, as they know it is not a matter of *if* there will be a shootout but *when*. For this reason, they continue to prepare. This could refer to the physical preparation of the space, which has a large concrete wall encircling the front, locked doors, and iron gates to keep out unwanted visitors. However, it could also describe the mental process of bracing oneself for a traumatic outbreak of violence—for which no amount of preparation enables someone to feel ready to confront.

While Flor had not experienced the disruption of armed conflict during her teaching hours at a community center, she still lamented the way that violence obliterated structure for a child and their family. She observed that violence could break out when a child was leaving for school or when parents needed to leave for work; armed conflict was a severely disruptive force that forced community members to cast aside any plan they may have had for their day and put them through emotional duress.

The Favela as a War Zone

Police operations and battles between criminal factions often take place in residential neighborhoods, causing community residents to be unwillingly caught in the middle of a war when the country is supposedly at peace. Several participants repeatedly used language of war when describing the experience of working in a conflict zone: Abigail, Douglas, Lu, Maria, Mia, Ricardo, Thaís, and Yvonne. These participants described intense, violent shootouts, as well as the use of weapons that went beyond simple handguns.

Lu worked in a particularly high-conflict favela in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro. Her responses emphasized the increasing militarization of both the police forces and criminal factions that engaged in conflict within her neighborhood. She said:

> A sensação é impactante, quando você está dentro de uma comunidade, você escuta um tiroteio. . . . É como se você estivesse numa zona de guerra mesmo. O armamento é ponto cinquenta, ponto trinta. É fuzil, é metralhadora, helicóptero atirando para baixo. Hoje até os drones aqui no Brasil está sendo usado para jogar granadas. Não, você vive . . . você vive num tempo onde as armas são o poder bélico.
>
> The sensation is impactful, when you are inside a community, [and] you hear a shootout. . . . It's as if you are in a real warzone. The bullets are .50, .30. It's an assault rifle, a machine gun, a helicopter shooting down. Today, there are even drones here in Brazil that are being used to throw grenades. No, you live . . . in a time where the arms are military-grade.

Lu's response illustrated the range of weapons that she is forced to confront as an educator and highlighted the intensity of the battles between traffickers and military police. The use of automatic weapons, grenades, and helicopter attacks demonstrates the extreme threat to life faced by community members who may be caught in the crossfire.

Lu was not the only participant who described helicopters shooting at the community itself. Yvonne is a director of an educational nonprofit in a similarly high-conflict favela. After the school was hit with machine-gun fire from a police helicopter, Yvonne placed a large sign on

the roof that read, ESCOLA, NÃO ATIRE (school, don't shoot). Despite directing an NGO in a favela on the other side of the city, Thaís has endured the same experiences. During the interview, she focused on a particularly tense period after the 2016 Olympics. A power struggle was sparked between different criminal groups who sought to fill the gap left when some of the UPP units seceded following the completion of this mega-event. Describing her experience caught at the NGO during a police operation, Thaís stated:

> Foi assustador mesmo, *assustador*, tipo helicóptero . . . mandando tiro pra baixo. . . . Eu tinha muito trauma de helicóptero. Não podia escutar helicóptero e já me vinha essa sensação daquele dia que a gente passou: um helicóptero mandando [bala], uma caixa d'água sendo furada. Então a água por todo os telhados de todo mundo. . . . Foi muita loucura.
>
> It was really terrifying, terrifying, like a helicopter . . . sending bullets down . . . . I had a lot of trauma from helicopters. I could not even bear listening to a helicopter, and I could already feel that sensation from what we went through that day: a helicopter shooting down, and a water tank bursting. So, the water was all over everyone's roofs. . . . It was really crazy.

During a shootout, the experience of taking shelter at school is already traumatic; a helicopter taking aim at the building and exploding a water tank only adds to the visceral scene of pure fear that Thaís and her students had to endure. Water dripped down from the roof while she and her students huddled in the kitchen, as the classroom windows faced the street and put them at risk of getting shot by the sprays of stray bullets. The women's responses illustrated that an increasingly militarized police force that engages in urban warfare has limited ability (or desire) to distinguish between the enemy and the neighborhood residents.

Several educators discussed the need for greater fortification at their schools. For instance, when Lu described the shootout that interrupted the therapy session, she lamented: "Não tinha muro, só tinha grade" (There was no wall, there were only bars). As a result, the children were at risk of being hit by a stray bullet and had to hide under the stairs. Douglas, a

director of an NGO, said that every educational institution should receive funds to invest in security. He emphasized the need for a safe room and a bulletproof or armored front that would prevent stray bullets from entering the school. Abrão's community center, where Flor and Maria worked, was encircled by a high concrete wall with a locked door. In 2015, the students and I huddled behind this concrete wall while a shootout took place on the alleyway alongside it. At the beginning of my fieldwork, Abigail's NGO had very little fortification: one locked door. By the end of my fieldwork, she had placed bars on the windows and was making plans to wall off the rooftop above the project.

In their responses, some educators used war-like language very little or not at all. Ci and Flor expressed being thankful that armed conflict had not broken out during their educational activities. Abrão and Henri had experienced the disruptions of police operations in both their professional and personal lives as favela residents, and while they described some of the violence they endured, they did not utilize consistent war-like language to the same extent as the other educators. In one instance, Abrão referred to the people in the favela as being held "hostage" during police invasions. Henri noted some challenging experiences and had been at Abigail's nonprofit during a day when the drug traffickers began testing their guns outside of the building. However, she noted that none of her experiences felt very intense. I had been at Abigail's with Henri on this day. When the guns began firing, the children scattered in all directions, and chaos took hold for the next 30 seconds. Once the children had calmed down, I checked in on Henri. "I didn't even hear the gunshots," she responded. "Growing up in a favela, you're just used to it."

Self-Sacrifice

Several participants described moments of imminent danger when the teachers put themselves at risk to protect their students. Abigail, a director and educator at an NGO, explained

that on at least three occasions she had to confront the drug traffickers to keep her students safe. One example occurred when a trafficker began testing his guns directly behind the NGO while class was in session:

> Começou a atirar e as crianças gritando, se jogando no chão. E isso foi horrível. Aí eu apareci na janela e falei que tinha criança no espaço. . . . Depois ele foi lá de novo, duas vezes seguida. Aí eu fui na janela já gritando, 'Tem criança!' . . . Ele falou que não sabia. . . . Eu falei com ele, 'Mas agora você sabe.'. . . E depois eu quis saber que ele era o gerente do morro. Tipo, ele era uma pessoa séria lá na favela.
>
> He started to shoot, and the children [were] screaming, throwing themselves on the floor. And this was horrible. So I went to the window and said that there were children here. . . . Afterward, he went there again, two times in a row. So I went to the window and yelled, *'There are children [here]!'* . . . He said that he did not know. I said to him, 'But now you know.' . . . And later I found out that he was the manager of the hill. Like, he was someone important in the favela.

Abigail appeared to feel perplexed upon looking back at the story: "Ele estava com uma arma na mão e eu gritei com uma pessoa com uma arma" (He had a gun in his hand, and I yelled at a person with a gun).

One educator spoke about multiple times when she placed herself in front of a weapon that was pointed at one of her students. For example, Lu spoke of when the police suspected that one of the students was a criminal. She indicated that the following story occurred in 2012, back when she initially had hope that the UPP would provide meaningful change to her community:

> Esse menino, ele tinha ido comprar o lanche, vinha [para a ONG] com a sacola de pão. Os polícia implicaram com ele. Quando ele chegou na ONG, o policial deu a volta pel[a] [escola], cheio de criança brincando no chão que tava tendo a oficina. Ele apontou o fuzil para esse garoto e eu tive que me colocar na frente. Então foi um momento muito difícil e muitas vezes a gente . . . eu não sei da onde a gente busca coragem. . . . Ele não está fazendo nada de errado. Por que ele é negro? Porque ele é preto, porque ele está na favela.
>
> One boy, he had gone to buy a snack, came [to the NGO] with a bag of bread. The police targeted him. When he arrived at the NGO, the police officer went around the school, full of children playing on the floor while a workshop was taking place. He pointed the assault rifle at the boy, and I had to put myself in front of it. So, this was a really difficult moment and many times we . . . I don't know where we find the courage. . . . He was not

> doing anything wrong. Was it because he was *negro*? Because he was *preto*, because he was in the favela.

According to Lu, the police were suspicious of the child, possibly because of his bag of bread. Favela children have been the target of police suspicion for far less. When the police officers arrived at the NGO and pointed an assault rifle at him, she immediately put herself in front of the gun. Later in the interview, she explained that this was not the first time she had stepped in front of a weapon to protect her students.

However, in analyzing the above situation, Lu observed that it was likely racism that led the boy to be criminalized by the police. She refers to him as both *negro* and *preto*, two words that refer to Black in Portuguese. By doing so, she appears to be emphasizing his Blackness. Several aspects of the student's identity overlapped to put him at increased risk of police violence: he was a boy, he was Black, and he lived in a favela (Håndlykken-Luz, 2020). Lu consistently put herself at grave danger in an attempt to stop the deadly outcome of racial profiling experienced by so many Black schoolchildren in Rio de Janeiro.

Trauma

Most of the participants described moments of extreme duress that resulted in the traumatization of themselves and their students. During their interviews, they described moments when armed conflict broke out in the middle of a lesson, and they had to take cover. As a result, the school became the site of trauma. The remaining two participants, Ci and Flor, felt grateful to have not witnessed armed conflict during their time as educators.

Despite attempting to engage in healing activities to support students suffering from trauma, shootouts and police operations would still occur during school hours, thus putting children in danger once again. For example, Lu described a time when armed conflict broke out during a therapy session at her NGO:

> Teve uma vez que estava tendo até uma voluntária—que nem voltou mais—de psicologia, estava atendendo na sala. Aí começou. . . . A gente teve que correr. O único espaço seguro que tinha era debaixo de uma escada. . . . Como você vai cuidar da saúde mental do indivíduo que tá nesse processo se curando, né? Tentando se curar, passando por um processo de terapia. E na hora que você tá na terapia, a bala come.
>
> There was one time when we even had a volunteer—who never returned—of psychology, who was supporting the class. Then it started. . . . We had to run. The only safe space that we had was under the stairs. . . . How are you going to take care of the mental health of an individual who is in this healing process? Trying to heal themselves, going through the process of therapy. And the moment that you are in therapy, you can hear the shooting.

During what was intended to be a healing therapy session in a safe space, the children were re-traumatized by yet another act of violence that threatened their lives and caused them to take cover. Lu's response emphasizes the extreme difficulty of trying to support the mental health of her students in the context of an environment that experienced persistent conflict.

Maria described how she felt whenever she had to endure an outbreak of armed conflict while at teaching school:

> A gente deita no chão . . . e às vezes começa a gritar, sabe? E teve uma vez que as crianças se desesperaram e começaram a correr pra lá e pra cá. . . . Nossa, a gente ficou sem saber o que fazer porque . . . a criança sofreu uma bala perdida. . . . A gente começa a tremer. Você fica parada, você fica sem ação, como se seu corpo estivesse, assim, imobilizado, sabe? O susto é tão grande que você—seu coração dispara. Você fica assim imobilizada, seu corpo fica pesado, você não consegue sair do lugar de susto, de medo. É horrível.
>
> We lay down on the floor . . . and sometimes we start to scream, you know? And there was one time when the children became desperate and started to run all over the place. . . . Gosh, we had no idea what to do because . . . a child was hit by a stray bullet. . . . We begin to shake. You stay still, you are unable to move, as if your body were, like, immobilized, you know? The fright is so great that you—your heart starts racing. You are immobilized, your body becomes heavy, you can't move from the spot because of the fright, the fear. It's horrible.

Her response moved between the present and past tense. She used present tense to describe her typical responses to any shootout during school hours (laying down on the floor, screaming). The

use of this tense highlights that this had been a habitual response to a repeated action. Next, she moved into a specific example of a particularly violent shootout that caused them to run instead of lay flat on the ground. During this time, a child had been struck by a stray bullet. Instead of armed conflict remaining outside the four walls of the school, it had violently intruded and injured a child. The overwhelming panic caused the people around her to rise up and run despite the dangers of doing so. She ended her response by moving again into the present tense to describe the feeling of deep fright she felt during each shootout. While certain events were more extreme than others, her response still highlighted persistent and repeating trauma of enduring shootouts during her work as a teacher.

The Normalization of Violence

Several educators lamented that the frequency of violence had led almost to its normalization. Speaking about the constant violence, Ricardo stated:

> Uma coisa que acontece muito com a gente é que a gente acaba banalizando isso. Quando você vive numa área de conflito, você ouve tiro desde muito pequeno. . . . Eu . . . não sei a primeira vez que eu ouvi um tiroteio e isso faz com que de alguma maneira—a gente pare de ter medo. E isso é muito ruim. Porque por mais que pareça, você não tem medo, não está tranquilo. Eu estou me acostumando com a violência.
>
> Something that happens a lot with us is that we end up trivializing it. When you live in a conflict zone, you hear gunshots from a very young age. . . . I don't know the first time I heard a shooting, and this makes us somehow—we stop being afraid. And that's really bad. Because even though it may seem like it, you're not afraid, [but] you're not calm. I'm getting used to the violence.

Ricardo’s tone of voice expressed frustration regarding the present situation and the recognition that *banalizando* the violence was not healthy. In his response, he noted that many people began to hear gunshots during their childhood, but he could not remember the first time he experienced this shock. Thus, there was no moment to demarcate a *before* and *after* on the timeline of his life;

armed conflict had been a perpetual presence, just as the state of exception had continued to persist for decades.

Ricardo also noted that when the shootout occurred, he entered a state of being neither afraid nor calm. Earlier in the interview, he described still carrying on a conversation during a shootout and simply talking over the noise. However, this did not mean he felt relaxed; he was still very much aware of the conflict. He was becoming accustomed to the violence, but he still entered an uneasy emotional state when it broke out. Abrão's responses also highlighted the regretful normalization of violence in his favela. Although he emphasized that no one should have to live under the constant threat of violence, he tried to maintain regular activities at the community center unless there was a larger operation.

Henri, who lived in the same favela as Abrão, similarly described the persistent levels of violence and regretted that this had become normal. She observed that some of her students had also been trivializing the violence recently: "As crianças . . . são muito acostumadas com isso, são muito acostumadas com essa vivência. Até na [ONG] também eles fazem muita brincadeira sobre esses assuntos" (The children . . . are very accustomed to this, very accustomed to this experience. Even at the [ONG], they make a lot of jokes about these topics). However, Henri emphasized that these types of jokes were not healthy. She noted that it was difficult to make the children understand that this type of humor was not appropriate because "olha onde eles vivem" (look at where they live). The persistent levels of violence in the children's external environment made it very challenging to support them in her work as an educator. Henri and Abigail (who worked at the same NGO) navigated the tension between refusing to normalize this violence but also having to find a way to live with it, to create a sense of normalcy while refusing to accept

these conditions as "normal." Their plight was all the more difficult with the *olheiro* standing outside their windows with his walkie-talkie.

Resilience

The interviews highlighted the educators' efforts to persist despite their challenging situations. In particular, the educators who both lived and worked in a favela, the constant armed conflicts often left them feeling raw. For example, Ricardo described the terror, devastation, and trauma of exposure to violence. However, his responses would nevertheless end by describing the ways he managed to persevere, as shown in the italicized phrases:

> Eu sou uma pessoa completamente derrotada nesse sentido de aceitar que a violência, ela foi capaz de me destruir, de me desmontar e de fazer com que eu não tivesse mais esse apreço pela vida. *Mas, ao mesmo tempo, eu tenho muita fé nos outros*.
>
> I am a completely defeated person in the sense of accepting that violence was capable of destroying me, of dismantling me and making me no longer have that appreciation for life. *But, at the same time, I have a lot of faith in others*.

Throughout the interview, Ricardo discussed the hopelessness of his own situation. But when he thought about his students, he repeatedly emphasized their potential: they had the ability to achieve dreams that they never thought were possible. He used himself and a good friend as an example. Growing up in the favela, neither of them thought they would get to see the world, but they both had opportunities to travel. He was able to travel to different places around the world by playing video games professionally, and his friend was able to live in Europe. Remembering these experiences seemed to give him hope. "Eu acho que a violência na favela, ela vai acabar afogando muito a gente. . . . Ela dificulta muito esse processo de ter fé no mundo. *Mas apesar disso, a gente segue*" (I think that violence in the favela, it will end up drowning a lot of us. . . . It makes this process of having faith in the world very difficult. *But despite this, we continue*). This response was another example of emphasizing the hopelessness of the situation while ending on

the note of resistance. The seemingly contradictory feelings often co-existed in the same train of thought.

In addition, despite the challenges that these participants have endured, none of them described a desire to leave their roles as educators. Many seemed to draw hope from the students themselves. The educators continued to show up at work, day after day, in spite of the challenges they may have faced when they got there.

However, I want to avoid perpetuating the dangerous archetype of the teacher as a martyr. This perception is extremely problematic when it comes to the present issue of pervasive armed conflict—as well as the frequent school shootings in the United States—since the deaths of educators may be seen as "necessary" to save children. "Isn't taking a bullet the ultimate expression of this archetype?" (Chesler, 2018, para. 9). However, no one pursues a role in education so they can stand on the front lines and be shot down as a result of the utter failure of state policies to protect schools. In the same vein, educators should not be judged for making the choice to leave in search of a safer work environment.

In fact, despite the participants' responses, violent conflict tends to significantly impact staff turnover at schools. During years of high geographic violence surrounding the school, teacher turnover is 12.7% higher on average than in normal years (Monteiro & Rocha, 2017). Similarly, principals are 12% more likely to leave their jobs within two years after a period of intense conflict (Monteiro & Rocha, 2017). While schools will close during police operations or shootouts, student absenteeism was found to be much lower than teacher absenteeism during conflicts (Monteiro & Rocha, 2017). One possible explanation for this finding is that many teachers may commute to work. Regardless, students are still impacted by high rates of teacher absenteeism and constant leadership turnover at schools.

While the educators in the present study demonstrated high levels of resilience in their responses, their working conditions are neither reasonable nor acceptable. These educators and their students deserve to be safe at school. Community members in favelas deserve to have freedom of movement without worrying about the next outbreak of unpredictable violence. At the time of writing, the educators in this study—and many others across the range of conflict zones in Rio de Janeiro—continue to endure conditions of war simply to teach at school. Their resilience is a response to these extreme conditions, but it is not the solution.

Impact on Well-Being of Educators

When the interview questions shifted and asked educators to focus on how this violence had impacted them personally, some of them responded with nervous laughter. While a few of the educators described ongoing meetings with a therapist, others engaged in different coping strategies to endure the day-to-day struggles of teaching in a conflict zone.

Psychological Support

A few participants mentioned meeting with a mental health professional and highlighted the benefits of therapy. For instance, Abigail said attending therapy was a way for her to take care of her own mental health. Douglas noted that setting up psychological support for his staff had been a priority for him as director of an NGO. He explained, "A gente tem acompanhamento psicológico também. A [psicóloga] faz o acompanhamento psicológico com todos da equipe e é extremamente importante, porque a gente tem que saber lidar com determinadas situações e lidar com nosso psicológico também" (We also have psychological support. The [psychologist] provides psychological support to everyone on the team, and it is extremely important, because we have to know how to deal with certain situations and deal with our psychological well-being as well). Douglas's response highlighted that he understood the challenges educators faced not

only from the local armed conflict but also in their efforts to support children growing up in poverty, oftentimes with overlapping traumas.

Douglas noted that psychological support was also important because it can be easy to fall into the trap of ruminating what they could have done better to help more students. He said that many of the children came to the NGO with intense challenges or traumas, and it was intensely difficult to support them with the presence of so many structural barriers. The psychologist reiterated for him that no one could save the whole world, and the work he was doing was still extremely impactful. As a result, he was able to better appreciate the small successes.

Coping Strategies

The educators described a range of coping strategies for enduring violence in their everyday lives, including their time at school. Examples include feeling numb, relying on religion, and expressing hope. Understanding the coping methods of educators is important, as these individuals may give so much of themselves to their jobs and toward the pursuit of creating a safer classroom environment. People who work in caring professions are more likely to suffer from burnout, as well as those working in jobs with higher stress levels and more emotional labor (Purper et al., 2022). The ability of employees to navigate these occupational stressors can impact their experience with burnout; for example, educators with greater levels of personal resilience will have lower levels of burnout (Xue et al., 2024). However, experiencing the trauma of a violent shootout goes beyond burnout and may instead contribute to PTSD (Carpiniello, 2023). Because of the potential for job-related and environmental factors to greatly impact the mental health of educators, it was important to analyze the ways in which they navigate these challenging realities.

Ricardo noted that the constant exposure to violence him feel numb. "Está batendo tiro, está batendo na parede da minha casa e isso não me afeta mais de tão comum, de tão frequente que isso é, sabe?" (There are shots going off, there are shots hitting the wall of my house, and it doesn't affect me anymore because it's so common, it's so frequent, you know?). He also said that the number of shootouts he had experienced could simply not be counted. However, it is important to note that he never downplayed the gravity of the violence that surrounded him. He worried that his students would go through the same process of desensitization: would they grow up and fail to struggle to distinguish between the good and bad in the world? Would they lose the ability to recognize true violence? He recognized the numbness he experienced but hoped they would escape the same fate.

Mia discussed her religion when describing how she helps to create a warm classroom environment at Thaís's nonprofit and when describing what she relies on to persevere: "É Jesus, Jesus . . . mesmo. É Ele que nos dá força pra caminhada" (It's Jesus, it's really Jesus. It's him who gives us strength for the journey). Throughout her interview, she emphasized that her religion helped her persevere through challenging times, and she used her spirituality to calm the students. For instance, she sang church songs in the classroom. Mia believed that Jesus had sent the students her way because she would be a source of support for them, and this gave her a great sense of calm and purpose.

Hope was a common theme and was often grounded in the hope for the students' potentiality. Some of the educators talked at length about the hope for their students to succeed. One of the most poignant examples came from Ricardo. He initially emphasized his own cynicism, which had appeared to help protect him against some of the impacts of violence. At first, he described the futility of trying to change the world: "Eu sei que na minha realidade, hoje

é tudo muito difícil de ser mudado. Eu não vou ver o tráfico de drogas acabar, o polícia não vai ganhar guerra contra as drogas enquanto eu estiver vivo, sabe?" (I know that in my life, nowadays everything is very difficult to change. I will not see drug trafficking end, the police will not win the war on drugs while I am alive, you know?). However, Ricardo did not demonstrate true hopelessness; his narratives always ended with the idea that perhaps the future could be better, or perhaps his students would still achieve a certain measure of success, allowing them to have a bright future. He said he would see a child and think: *you have enormous potential*.

Similarly, Douglas would remind himself of the older children who were accepted into public universities and all the times he saw the younger children laughing and playing. Both the larger successes and smaller moments gave him joy. This sentiment was shared by Ricardo: "Eu sei que eu não vou conseguir mudar o mundo na escala em que eu gostaria, mas eu sei que uma vida já o suficiente e isso é o que me move" (I know that I won't be able to change the world on the scale that I would like, but I know that one life is enough, and that's what drives me.). Not only did the students have the chance to have a better life, but the educators felt fulfillment from being able to see the results of their hard work. Hope was a powerful driving force that encouraged them to persist.

However, when considering the intense challenges these educators faced, hope may often feel elusive. The persistent threats to their mental and physical health should not be discounted. When asked what motivated her to stay, Yvonne said, "O amor às crianças e o sucesso cognitivo de crianças com traumas" (The love for children and the cognitive success of children with trauma). Douglas responded, "É o amor ao próximo e a firme convicção de que a educação é a única ferramenta capaz de mudar vidas, proporcionar oportunidades e, acima de tudo,

transformar o mundo" (It is love for one's neighbor and the firm conviction that education is the only tool capable of changing lives, providing opportunities and, above all, transforming the world). Abrão similarly reiterated: it was all for the children.

Impact on Well-Being of Students

Every participant emphasized the extreme challenges faced by their students as they grew up in a conflict zone. They often used the words "trauma" or "traumatizing" to describe the students' experiences. In addition to the obvious physical threat of the ever-present violence, their students also faced abuse, neglect, mental health struggles, and more. As a result, multiple forces intersected and compounded the students' traumas.

Mental Health

All of the participants discussed the mental health of their students, although they did not often distinguish between the struggles caused by violence or challenges faced outside the classroom. Many of the educators noted the presence of severe challenges in the children's home environments, such as abuse, neglect, alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, transience, or homelessness. The children often showed indications of a difficult home life through their behavior at school. Both Abigail and Maria said that some of their students behaved aggressively in class because they experienced varying forms of abuse at home. They tried to show patience and empathy while teaching these students more effective ways to resolve conflicts. Speaking on this topic, Thaís stated, "Acho que o desafio é meio as crianças quebrarem o ciclo familiar, entendeu?" (I think the challenge is for the children to break the family cycle, you know?). However, many educators also said it was difficult at times to make an impact in the presence of so many structural barriers.

Many educators observed that the violence impacted students emotionally and hindered their ability to focus. Ricardo noted that during a shootout, the students were desperately worried about their families: “[the children] estão preocupadas com os pais que estão fora, as mães que estão fora, os irmãos, a casa” ([the children] are worried about their fathers who are outside, their mothers who are outside, their siblings, their house). Douglas emphasized that the constant shootouts made it difficult for children to sleep at night, causing them to arrive at school feeling tired and unfocused. Lu expressed a similar sentiment in her interview: how can the children sleep at night knowing that there may be a police operation the next morning? Finally, Abigail worried that when children had to take cover at school due to armed conflict, they would begin to associate that class or learning activity with trauma.

Stigma

Several educators rebuked the way that police officers and even the larger Brazilian society often stigmatized their students as criminals, or future criminals in training, simply because they were growing up in a favela. This stigma put the students at risk because if the larger society viewed them as criminals, then their deaths could be perceived as justified. Lu, the educator who had stood in front of a police officer’s gun twice for her students, became especially impassioned when discussing this topic. She named a list of children who had been shot or killed by police in her favela and then stated, “[A polícia] mata eles, pergunta depois. A polícia é desse jeito” (The police kill first, ask questions later. The police are like that). Lu said these children were killed for simply living in a favela.

During my time teaching at nonprofits in Rio de Janeiro, I heard people perpetuate stereotypes about favela children, especially the false notion that they were unaffected by exposure to violence. These sentiments often emerged as bizarre compliments: “The children

must be immune to the sounds of gunfire." "They don't even notice the violence around them." These comments did not reflect the reality of my time with the students. During one of my first days of teaching, a child collapsed in sobs when recalling the smoke bomb that the police threw into their home during a raid. He yelled, *"I couldn't breathe! I couldn't breathe!"*

Some visitors to the NGO would describe the school like it was the one force in the children's lives that was stopping them from becoming swept into a life of crime and drug trafficking, as if the students did not have any caring adults in their lives or other dreams for their futures. Some did not speak of them as children at all: "They have to grow up fast; they don't get to have a childhood." Although these comments came from well-intentioned adults, they perpetuated a dangerous narrative that the students were not like *other* children and could somehow bear what they were being forced to endure.

Despite the caricatures of favela residents as criminals across the media and in the public imagination, most are just hard-working people. In interviews with residents of a large favela in Rio's South Zone, they estimated that 1% or fewer residents were involved with trafficking (Robb Larkins, 2015). Robb Larkins (2015) explained:

> For most of the residents I knew, the goal was most certainly not to be part of an imagined parallel trafficker state. Nor was it to form another society external to the larger Brazilian one. People longed to enter the economic, political, and cultural mainstream. (p. 9)

Although the residents desire access to the same resources as residents of the *asfalto*, the process of stigmatization denies them this access and attempts to justify it by labeling these individuals as criminals. As Pongeluppe (2024) explained, this is a cycle of disenfranchisement. The state engages in a policy of exclusion that allows criminal groups to fill the gap and establish power, the state pretends to establish a presence through spectacles of violence (Robb Larkins, 2015),

this violence is leveraged to cast all favela residents as violent beings, and their disenfranchisement is perceived as deserving (Pongeluppe, 2024).

Children from favelas are punished when they are able to persist despite such injustices. They are perceived as resilient when they endure unbearable and unjust hardships, and this resilience is weaponized to further rationalize the presence of additional atrocities. Furthermore, if they are perceived as criminals, then the violence inflicted against them is seen as fitting. *Bandido bom é bandido morto*.

But stigma is a limiting force. Looking at another through the cracked and dirty lens of stigma obfuscates the view of real human beings, causing the viewer to rely on reductive stereotypes to fill in the blanks. If we could somehow lift the veil and uncover the raw horror of this war, if we could convey the humanity of these children to the people who carry the gun or wear the badge or sign the paper damning them to more violence, maybe things would be different.

Conclusion

Many of the educators in this study endured shocking experiences of extreme violence. While armed conflict broke out on the streets between criminal groups and state actors, some of the students also had the experience of being the targets of violence. Sometimes the police, the very ones who were hired to protect citizens, instead turned their guns on them. Lu's interview highlighted that she had stepped in front of a gun more than once to protect her students. The interviews of educators demonstrate that students and educators are not simply collateral damage in wide-scale armed conflict—at times, they are directly targeted. Nevertheless, the indiscriminate shooting of police helicopters at residential buildings and schools below shows a blatant disregard for human life.

Several themes have been discussed in relation to the educators' experiences: unpredictability of violence, the favela as a war zone, self-sacrifice, trauma, the normalization of violence, and resilience. Both educators and students endured the consequences on their mental health as a result of this persistent violence. However, instead of being treated with empathy, students from favelas must also endure societal stigma due to their identity as favela residents, their socioeconomic status, and (often) the color of their skin. These experiences compound the suffering that these individuals endure due to violence, trauma, poverty, and other structural barriers that disproportionately hinder their access to public resources.

Many of the educators have endured devastating and traumatic experiences that are beyond comprehension. Witnessing an outbreak of violence one time is sufficient to inflict trauma, but repeated exposures over years or even decades have the potential to re-open psychological wounds again and again, fundamentally altering one's sense of safety. The unpredictability of violence further erodes one's ability to feel safe anywhere, let alone school. When the school itself becomes the site of trauma, it could become a trigger, as Abigail noted. Despite these seemingly impossible situations, the educators often found a small measure of hope and possibility, often within their own students. Their experiences highlight that individuals in conflict zones can negotiate between hope and despair, two seemingly contradictory concepts that can nevertheless coexist, especially in extreme environments.

However, the solution to this complex issue is not to leverage and maximize the educators' resilience. Many of them are teaching in an active warzone, albeit one that is not officially declared. The urgency of their situations cannot be overstated. Meaningful solutions must address the root cause of the different forms of violence they encounter and provide

educators with the protection, resources, and support they deserve. Expecting them to simply continue to endure is neither sustainable nor just.

Chapter Two

"What's happening at the school?" Yvonne asked. "Is it safe?"

It was my second time trying to visit Yvonne's NGO that week. She was the director of Projeto Uerê, a large educational nonprofit serving 270 children (Projeto Uerê, 2024). I met at the lobby of her apartment building, and before we traveled to the project together, she called a staff member to check in. The school was located in a favela in Complexo da Maré, a complex of 16 favelas. During the week leading up to my visit, this complex was in the news nearly every day due to violent police operations. On Tuesday, the day we had originally scheduled, she messaged me early: classes were cancelled; another police operation was underway. We decided to try again Friday.

Now, standing in the lobby, she focused intently on the phone. She nodded. "Let's go."

Yvonne informed me that her school had already closed 36 days that year due to violence. While traveling northbound on the highway, she had to slow down after hitting some unexpected traffic. "This isn't right," she said. She called the school again: "Is there an operation? Is it safe?"

Despite the tension during the ride, once we arrived, Yvonne entered the school confidently. The NGO was operating at full capacity, and children's voices echoed across the halls. The students were engaged in a range of educational programming: reading, writing, math, geography, history, science, languages, computer literacy, chorus, and music (Projeto Uerê, n.d.-b). At the project, each child learned an instrument.

One of the first classes Yvonne checked in was the orchestra, called the Camerata Uerê. A class full of teenagers sat with their string instruments and looked attentively at the conductor, who told them to start the piece again from the top. There was a long pause when the students held their bows at attention but did not move, waiting diligently for the signal. We held our

breaths. Outside, there was the faint roar of traffic from the highway, the sounds of neighbors calling to each other, and the laughter of children in the street. Bright sunlight cast shadows across the walls. Suddenly, bows struck the strings in unison, igniting the first notes. As if holding a conversation, more instruments responded to the call, and the music began to build and swell to fill the small classroom. The music seemed to rise and fall, growing in intensity and then releasing, telling a story, expanding outward past the four walls of the classroom and filling the *becos* and alleyways with a symphony, drowning out the cacophony of the favela. I wondered if the people outside stopped in their tracks and stood to listen.

Slowly, the students drew their bows across the last notes, letting the last sounds slowly linger and fade. They held their bows at their sides. I was stunned, my ears still ringing with the notes, unable to comprehend or even hear the sudden silence. We began to clap.

Yvonne was smiling. “Come see another class.”

The director has a long history of educating and advocating for vulnerable children. In the 1970s, Yvonne researched the cognition of children living in various warzones in Africa: Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Angola (Projeto Uerê, n.d.-a). She returned to Brazil, and in 1980, Yvonne opened her first school for children living on the street in Rio de Janeiro: *A Escola Sem Portas Nem Janelas*, or The School Without Doors or Windows (Projeto Uerê, n.d.-c). Her advocacy intensified following the Candelária massacre in 1993, when off-duty military police took aim at homeless youth who were sleeping on the steps of the Candelária church, killing eight of them. They were her students (Projeto Uerê, n.d.-c). Yvonne was the first one they called (Bowater, 2013).

The tragedy did not stop with the massacre; most of the survivors have since disappeared or died violent deaths (Schmidt, 2023). One of them was shot in front of her own home in 2000

before she was expected to testify against one of the murderers (Bowater, 2013). That same year, another survivor held an entire bus hostage in 2000, ultimately dying during a police stand-off (Bowater, 2013). Both of them had been children at the time of the massacre.

These devastating events illustrate the long-lasting consequences of violence, poverty, and trauma. Yvonne officially opened Projeto Uerê in 1998 to provide comprehensive education to the students living in Complexo da Maré using a trauma-informed curriculum she designed herself. She recognized the impact of trauma on not just academic achievement but all aspects of a child's life—and their future. Her work aimed to help children heal from this trauma using a neurodevelopmental approach.

However, the external environment continued to challenge Yvonne's efforts. Immediately after my visit, schools across Complexo da Maré—including Projeto Uerê—would be closed for more than two weeks because of violent, daily police operations.

Whenever possible, Projeto Uerê remained open to serve children. But it required increasing levels of vigilance among Yvonne and her staff: "Is it safe?"

The goal of this chapter is to shed light on the different ways that educators modify their pedagogical strategies in response to violence. Initially, my focus as a researcher had been to examine the impact of the sensational gun violence often seen in the media. This form of violence is more overt and is often what comes to mind when someone thinks of the word *violence*. However, while investigating and navigating these conflict zones, I learned that other forms of violence informed the educators' responses in the classroom. For example, structural violence refers to structural forces and the sociopolitical context that contribute to unequal outcomes or harm experienced by certain groups (Farmer, 1996). Many of the students and educators experienced structural violence in the form of long-standing inequities in the

distribution of power and resources (Macassa, 2023). Finally, slow violence is a gradual, incremental form of violence that may result in wide-scale catastrophe in the future but whose slowly unfolding nature makes it difficult to establish a sense of urgency (Nixon, 2011). The educators' and students' repeated exposures to intense gun violence indicate the presence of a growing public health crisis, and due to the ability of trauma effects to be passed down from generation to generation—whether through epigenetics, parenting behaviors, or more—it highlights the possibility of deeply entrenched inequities in mental and physical health (van der Kolk, 2015).

Thus, this chapter illustrates the educators' responses to sensational violence, structural violence, and slow violence. Although they worked in different favelas across the broader Rio de Janeiro, many of them engaged in similar strategies that aligned with trauma-informed teaching and not only healed but empowered their students. Ultimately, this chapter argues that despite the various forms of violence and the disproportionate lack of resources the educators were faced with, they used their agency to reconstitute the classroom as a space of hope.

Sensational Violence

Across Rio de Janeiro, sensational violence occurs through gun violence, police operations, and gang warfare. The performances of violence aim to communicate a message regarding who is in control. The police engage in dramatic operations to re-assert their presence in a community that has long suffered from exclusion, while drug traffickers demonstrate their force with jewelry and expensive guns (Robb Larkins, 2015). One of the ways the militias demonstrate their power is through public revenge killings or the burning of dozens of city buses, such as after the murder of a *miliciano* high in the chain of command (CNN, 2023). As Robb Larkins (2015) noted, violence becomes a spectacle that "diverts attention away from the social

relationships that enable such violence in the first place" (p. 13). Often the media perpetuates this violence, such as through live recordings of helicopters or tanks entering a favela or through dramatic photographs of captured criminals, illegal guns, or stacks of drugs.

The presence of multiple criminal groups and different state actors at war with each other means there are multiple threats that favela and periphery residents must endure. Sensational violence is a disruptive force that not only halts educational activities but leaves students and educators with long-lasting trauma. Although educators must often manage their own mental health struggles following these events, they still take charge as the ones tasked to protect and comfort the children. Thus, they engage in a variety of responses to support their students following an outbreak of violence. Strategies include holding classroom discussions, engaging in art therapy, and attempting to re-establish a normal routine for the children.

Classroom Discussions

The educators also mentioned classroom discussions as a useful tool for helping students navigate the challenges of unpacking their violent experiences. For example, Thaís explained that after an incident of armed conflict in the community, she set aside class time to allow students to share their perspectives.

> Então a gente tem um dia para parar, a gente para, a gente escuta o que eles querem falar. A gente pergunta também o que poderia ser feito. Então cada um tem uma opinião. São crianças. Mesmo sabendo que isso não vai acontecer, essa mudança não vai acontecer, mas é uma coisa que eles desejam, né?
>
> Then we take a day to stop, we stop, we listen to what they want to say. We also ask what could have been done. Then each one of them has an opinion. They are children. Despite knowing that this will not happen, this change will not happen, it is still something they hope for, isn't that right?

Thaís made it clear that she respected her students' opinions and that they deserved to have a voice regarding this conflict. Many aspects of her students' identities made it so that they were

powerless in the midst of this violence, such as their young and their status as favela residents. However, Thaís sought to empower them and develop their critical consciousness. Even though the children themselves could not stop the violence at its roots, they had the right to form an opinion about a phenomenon that so deeply affected their lives. As they grew up, they could develop these opinions and form them into meaningful actions and advocacy. Giving children the autonomy to share their perspectives and forming a classroom environment where they feel safe to do so are both examples of trauma-informed teaching. Thaís, as well as the other educators, cared deeply about her students and wanted to create a space where they could process their emotions about the violence in the community and begin to heal.

Art Therapy

Art therapy was a strategy mentioned by several participants as a method for calming students and helping them release some of their intense emotions. Thaís explained that her NGO held art therapy classes for the students. One day, she and the teaching staff organized a field trip to a local park, where the students were able to paint canvases and experience time in nature. In addition to giving the students a creative outlet, Thaís thought it was important that they have peaceful and recreational experiences outside of the favela. The peace of the quiet park would further enable the children to focus on their artwork.

In nearly all of the sites visited during my fieldwork, the students consistently used art not just as a mode of learning but as a way to process their emotions. Whether or not the lesson was specifically aimed at facilitating mindfulness, the children often became calmer and regulated their emotions during the art activity. An example can be seen in Figure 1 during a portrait activity in Abigail's art class.

Figure 1

Portraits in Art Class

Nearly 15 children participated, and when they first entered the classroom, they demonstrated an array of intense emotions: excitement, frustration, anger, and exhaustion. After several minutes of the art activity, one of the students decided to put on music while they painted. A sense of calm fell over the room. The children furrowed their brows and worked diligently on their portraits for the next hour.

Art is a creative approach that aligns with trauma-informed teaching because it can have a positive impact on children with PTSD. Morison et al. (2021) found that art-based interventions can address negative mood and decrease symptoms of trauma among children and adolescents who had been exposed to traumatic events. Art could also serve as a medium that allowed children to process other complex topics. For example, Abigail taught conscientization through art activities that allowed students to analyze societal injustices and reimagine their own alternatives. Art is a subject that many children feel drawn to and comfortable engaging in; this

comfort can serve as a foundation for having difficult conversations, navigating one's feelings, and beginning to heal.

Return to a Normal Routine

A few of the educators emphasized that whenever possible, they try to return to a normal routine after a police operation or inter-gang warfare. Abrão tried to keep his community center open during smaller shootouts: "Na maioria das vezes a gente continua fazendo o nosso trabalho" (Most of the time, we continue doing our work). Only during *incursões*, or larger invasions, did the community center close down. Mia similarly noted that she would usually attempt a return to normalcy in her classroom following a shootout:

> Muitas vezes eu quase não faço nada depois de passar um tempo, porque como falei, eu não me acostumei. Eu sou muito mexida, fico nervosa, fico ansiosa, eu fico tensa, qualquer barulho me assusta e eu procuro falar com eles na normalidade, tem que ser, né, entre aspas: "normalidade."
>
> Many times, I don't do hardly anything after a while, because like I said, I have not gotten used to it. I am very sensitive, I get nervous, I get anxious, I get tense, any type of noise scares me, and I try to talk with them as if everything is normal, it has to be this way, right, between quotation marks: "normally."

Although Mia had not grown accustomed to the constant violence, she still tried to speak with her students normally following a shootout or police operation. However, she emphasized that *normally* needed to be in quotation marks, as these experiences were neither normal nor acceptable.

Ricardo had also noted that during a shootout, the teaching staff will first gauge if it is occurring close to the building. If the conflict was still far away, they would gather for an interactive and engaging activity to distract the children and attempt to keep them at school. His response indicated that returning to a normal routine was a way to keep children safe inside and protect them from the external environment. Moreover, the conflicts occurred so much that to

come to an immediate cessation of class activities every time would only further disrupt the children's education.

Structural Violence

In addition to describing their immediate responses following sensational violence, many educators also detailed their efforts to resist structural violence. This form of violence is defined as structural forces that often intersect to exacerbate disparities experienced by marginalized groups (Farmer, 1996). Although sensational violence is more likely to be the subject of news headlines, structural violence is nevertheless sinister because of its subtle nature. The dominant group can make an effort to deny the presence of structural violence or justify the unequal allocation of resources through politics of deservingness.

In the present study, many of the educators and students experienced structural violence through unequal access to power and resources (Macassa, 2023). As Douglas noted, his NGO was located in Rio de Janeiro, one of the world's most iconic cities—how could a place with so many resources still have children who were unable to fulfill their need for basic hygiene because they did not have running water at home or the money to buy soap? Lu observed that true public security should not be realized through police violence but rather through access to health, education, leisure, and culture. She contended that real public security should be about taking care of the *public*; however, historical violence and disproportionate access to resources had led to the "Brazilian public security" that she said was in place today. Similar to Douglas, Lu said it was dismaying to see such a beautiful country with so many possibilities fall to this flawed and unequal system.

The educators recognized the structural forces that impacted students' academic progress and emotional well-being and strived to address these issues in their classroom. In this way, their

teaching became a form of resistance. Instead of acquiescing to the dominant narrative about children from favelas belonging to a lower rung of the social hierarchy, the educators rebuked this notion and aimed to empower their students.

Their day-to-day strategies to reduce triggers and establish a comforting learning environment are also aligned with trauma-informed teaching, an ongoing process that occurs at all times, not simply following an acute, traumatic event. Several themes emerged among the participant responses, such as resistance and shared authority in the classroom.

Resistance

Some of the educators have engaged in varying acts of resistance against structural violence. For example, Yvonne's nonprofit, Projeto Uerê, has murals that convey powerful messages asserting the children's basic human rights. For example, two of the murals advocate for students' right to safety and recreation. The murals reflect different areas of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. A child's safety represents one of the more fundamental needs, while recreation and creativity represent the higher need of self-actualization. Figure 2 highlights the children's right to safety.

Figure 2

"I Have the Right to Live Without Fear"

The mural in Figure 2 is especially impactful, considering that Yvonne's NGO has been the target of machine-gun fire from a police helicopter. However, the right to live without fear could convey many meanings, especially in an environment with so many threats. The children had the right to live without fear of abuse, neglect, hunger, homelessness, illness, injury, or death.

Figure 3 shows a mural that similarly asserts the children's rights but also advocates for their right to *be* children. The violence that occurs in favelas is only perpetuated by a small percentage of favela residents, outside criminal groups, or state actors. Nevertheless, because the favela is perceived as a sacrifice zone where violence is permitted to occur (as justified by Rio de Janeiro's ever-present state of exception), the children become associated with the violence that occurs around them. The mural in Figure 3 rebukes that stereotype and reinforces the idea that all

children have the right to play and engage in cultural learning activities. Although seemingly innocuous, this mural may be nevertheless perceived as controversial to some because it emphasizes that favela children have the same rights and opportunities as any other child.

Figure 3

"Each Child Has the Right to Culture, Sport, Art, and Leisure"

Not only do the murals advocate for the right of children to thrive, but they also reflect trauma-informed teaching, as they assert the children's right to safety. The brightly colored murals with positive messages were displayed all over Yvonne's NGO, and by continuously looking at these messages, the children may begin to internalize them.

Shared Authority in Learning

Some of the educators explained that one of the ways they establish a comforting classroom environment is to minimize or eliminate the notion of a hierarchy between teachers and students. Classroom management was not handled with fear. Moreover, as Abigail noted, she

wanted students to understand that learning was a lifelong process, and she herself was still learning alongside them. While she worked as a full-time director at her nonprofit, Abigail was also attending university to become a teacher. Although her knowledge, confidence, and competence in the classroom appeared to be that of an experienced teacher, she emphasized that she was still learning. She wanted her students to understand that they could learn from her, but she could also learn just as much from them:

> É uma troca eterna. Eu acho que essa é a maneira que eu mantenho seguro mostrar para eles que eu sei o que eu estou fazendo e ao mesmo tempo dar liberdade para eles me ensinarem.
>
> It's an eternal exchange. I think that this is the way I make sure to show them that I know what I am doing and at the same time give freedom for them to teach me.

Her response demonstrates that the educator is not the only one who imparts knowledge; the students are also co-constructors of knowledge in the classroom. Thus, they learn from each other in an "exchange."

Her classroom philosophy also aligned with that of Freire (1970), who argued against the banking concept of education, a form of pedagogy that can often be seen in classrooms that prioritize rote memorization. In the banking concept, the educator is the depositor of information, and the students are the empty receptacles that are waiting to receive information (Freire, 1970). This information is stored and memorized in their brains. One of the many problems of the banking concept of education is that it assumes students come to school as blank slates, without knowledge to impart. It also assumes that learning through memorization is the purpose of schooling: the careful cataloguing of facts. However, as Abigail noted in her interview, the students have so much that they can contribute to the classroom and can also teach the educators as well. The classroom can be a way for students and educators to develop knowledge together. Many of Abigail's lessons aimed at instilling a critical consciousness among her students, and

she often used class discussions to help them think carefully about societal injustices. Her pedagogy reflects Freire not just in the development of critical thinking skills but through the shared authority between teacher and student. Since Abigail refused to take an authoritarian approach with her students, she was also able to establish a comforting classroom environment that was less likely to trigger students with trauma; thus, her pedagogy aligned with trauma-informed teaching.

Moreover, Abigail's actions disrupted the oppressive structures in the children's external environment that attempted to relegate them to the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy. As an educator, she refused to reproduce this hierarchy in her classroom and resisted the structural violence that attempted to limit her students' agency and potential.

Slow Violence

Slow violence is often not recognized as violence because its most significant impacts are likely to be seen in the future (Nixon, 2011). This form of violence is a slowly unfolding catastrophe that will ultimately have devastating impacts for large groups of people (Nixon, 2011). Nixon (2011) explained that in contrast to explosive and spectacular violence, slow violence is "incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (p. 2). From an environmental perspective, examples of slow violence include climate change, deforestation, or the aftermath of nuclear war (Nixon, 2011). In the context of Rio de Janeiro, slow violence could be seen in the growing public health crisis of an increasingly traumatized population.

The educators and students in the present study have been repeatedly exposed to sensational and structural violence, which may compound and contribute to overlapping layers of trauma. In addition to inflicting severe psychological consequences across the lifespan, trauma

has the potential to cause intergenerational effects. Experiencing severe trauma or stress can cause changes in gene expression in what is known as epigenetic modification (Chou et al., 2024). These genetic modifications may be passed down to one's children, which can cause them to be more sensitive to stress.

Moreover, individuals may develop PTSD, anxiety, or depression as a result of experiencing violence (Lim et al., 2022). These mental health challenges can negatively impact one's parenting style. Parents suffering from trauma may raise their children in high-stress or abusive environments, causing children to develop emotional dysregulation (Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2015). Unresolved trauma in a family can create a cycle of abuse or neglect that is passed down through generations (Greene et al., 2020).

Thus, the trauma of experiencing sensational and structural violence has the potential to develop into a public health crisis. Some of the educators utilized strategies to address slow violence, such as the implementation of a brain-based pedagogy or the creation of a community of learners.

Brain-Based Pedagogy

While many of the educators instinctively engaged in strategies that aligned with best practices of trauma-informed teaching, Yvonne specifically developed a brain-based, trauma-informed curriculum following her experiences teaching students who had often been exposed to violence. The goal of the Uerê-Mello pedagogy was to heal children who had suffered from trauma. Yvonne combined neuroscience with pedagogical approaches to leverage the plasticity of a child's growing brain and econstruct mental pathways that had been disrupted through violence or exposure to other traumas (Bezerra de Mello, 2017). The goal of educators

trained in this pedagogy is to help students fortify their memory and coordination while developing their oral skills, language skills, and social-emotional skills (Bezerra de Mello, 2017).

At Projeto Uerê, students of varying ages engaged in dynamic oral exercises that awakened their brains and strengthened their engagement. During my visit, Yvonne explained that the children needed to "warm up" their brains before instructions could occur. She also emphasized oral-based activities for the younger students, as she noted that far too often, long writing exercises have been used as a crutch to keep students quiet and obedient. A younger class I visited engaged in a series of fast-paced word-play games that involved kinesthetic activities. In a different classroom, students began their class with a series of quick mental math exercises and shouted out their answers. In a third class, the children read a book together and responded to a series of comprehension questions through a class discussion.

In each class, the activities were carefully planned and arranged in a logical sequence with a brisk pace. The brain was kept active through word play, math, movements, and even the use of different languages. In addition, they had the opportunities for creative outlets through music classes and other workshops that sometimes cycled as part of the programming, such as capoeira. The students' brains were constantly being stimulated, and the encouraging classroom environments helped to develop their self-efficacy. Yvonne's pedagogy and her activism conveyed the strong message that children are not defined by their trauma or their circumstances. She also emphasized that educators can make strategic decisions in the classroom to help students heal and realize their full potential.

A Community of Learners

Depending on their roles, many of the educators expressed a desire to establish a school-wide or classroom-based community of learners. For example, the directors of NGOs

often expressed the need to establish a safe and comforting classroom environment across the entire school. For example, as director of a community center, Abrão's responses spoke of the need to ensure all learners were able to achieve success while also developing an appreciation for the resources his nonprofit had to offer. Abrão refused to expel any student. He explained his decision in the following response:

> Então aqui é acolhedor. Eu nunca vou expulsar ninguém, nem uma criança, nem um adolescente, mas vou tirar um pouco daqui do tempo que ele gosta de estar aqui para que ele aprenda o seguinte—que aqui é um ambiente saudável para ele, que aqui todo mundo que ajudar iria vencer. Ninguém está com ciúme dele crescer. Pelo contrário, a gente luta para a pessoa crescer, então ele precisa entender isso.
>
> So here, it is welcoming. I will never expel anyone, not a child or a teenager, but I will take some of the time he likes to spend here so that he can learn the following—that this is a healthy environment for him, that here everyone who helps will win. No one is jealous of him as he grows. On the contrary, we fight for people to grow, so he needs to understand that.

Abrão's response demonstrated his commitment to his students. While he said he never wanted to remove any student from the community center, he said he had temporarily suspended them in the past when necessary. However, he encouraged them to return with their family members to facilitate a successful return to class. Abrão noted that with some time away from the community center, the children often developed an appreciation for what they had lost, and they tended to return with a more positive mindset.

Some of the educators described their efforts to build a community of learners by creating a respectful environment. Maria, who worked at Abrão's community center as a teacher, noted that one of her biggest priorities was ensuring that her students were respectful and caring of each other. As a result, she took it seriously when the students argued, especially if any of them expressed any prejudice. In the example of homophobia, Maria noted that she would immediately talk to her students about why the comment had been wrong and hurtful. While she

was firm about prejudice not being tolerated in her classroom, she emphasized that it was used as a learning moment so the child could learn. She would lead whole-class discussions about respect. Flor, another teacher at the community center, expressed a similar sentiment and also noted that any prejudicial language was immediately addressed in the classroom. Lu confirmed this in her own interview: “A gente trabalha as atitudes e a gente sempre está trabalhando temas voltada a questão do racismo, a questão do bullying na escola, porque essas coisas deveriam ser dialogadas na escola” (We work on attitudes, and we are always working on topics related to the issue of racism, the issue of bullying in schools, because these things should be discussed at school). Her response reiterates that school is a space of learning—not just for academics but for learning how to interact respectfully with others.

The language chosen by some of the participants also conveyed the presence of a community. For example, Abrão, Maria, and Flor all worked at the same community center, but in their separate interviews, they referred to the students as “amigos.” The educators emphasized that it was important for the “friends,” or students, to not fight amongst each other. Speaking of the importance of building a supportive community for each child, Abrão explained, “Ele precisa entender que aqui tem uns amigos e pessoas que querem fazer ele vencer, mostrar um caminho diferente” (He needs to understand that here he has some friends and people that want to make sure he succeeds, to show him a different path). Similarly, when discussing the need to combat homophobia and racism in schools, Flor emphasized the need for wide-scale collaboration, including amongst the students themselves: “precisa de mais colaboração, como colaboração familiar. A escola, os amigos, todos os professores” (we need more collaboration, like family collaboration. The school, friends, all the teachers). In addition to referring to students as *amigos*,

Flor recognized that people from various spheres of the child's life need to come together to help effect change.

Creating a community of learners aligns with best practices for trauma-informed teaching, as it ties into children's need for safety. By reducing the presence of triggers, the classroom can be a place where students can bond with each other, take risks, and form meaningful relationships. Forming a strong foundation of trust allows for children to feel a sense of emotional safety and navigate their traumas.

Conclusion

Multiple forms of violence intersect to compound the students' experiences with trauma. In Rio de Janeiro, educators in conflict zones face the consequences of sensational violence, structural violence, and slow violence. To support their students, the educators in the present study made several actions in the classroom that aligned with trauma-informed teaching. To address the impacts of sensational violence, educators implemented strategies such as classroom discussions, art therapy, and a return to a normal routine. To address structural violence, educators engaged in acts of resistance or established shared authority in learning. To address slow violence, some educators implemented brain-based pedagogical strategies or created a community of learners, thus establishing a comforting environment that was conducive to healing trauma.

These different pedagogical strategies were implemented with the needs of the whole child in mind. The educators also engaged in complex work to protect their students from both physical threats and the threats of prejudice. The educators uniformly rebuked the stereotypes of children from favelas and gave students opportunities to *be* children while maintaining a

respectful environment that encouraged their contributions. The educators repeatedly highlighted the students' capacity to learn, heal, and succeed.

Although the classrooms were reconstituted as spaces for hope, the outside world still attempts to act as a crushing force to limit the students' dreams. The rampant criminalization of children from favelas continues. While there are exceptions, the real violence is not often enacted *by* these children; rather, it is usually inflicted *upon* them, in ways that do not make sensationalist news headlines. As a former educator in a favela, I witnessed harrowing outbreaks of violence as well as the slow, insidious forces that wrought a slow path of devastation over time. Violence could be seen in the smile of my former student—a 5-year-old girl—with blackened baby teeth rotten by decay. It could be seen when her classmate's hair parted to the side, revealing small bald patches across her scalp. This violence could even be heard, like when some of my students buried their hands in their hair to vigorously scratch the lice breeding at their roots.

Violence is living near garbage heaps that writhe with rat infestations, it's foreigners taking safari-themed tours through your community, it's traversing a rushing river of sewage and trash during a downpour, it's listening for the landslide sirens, it's passing AR-15s on the way to school. Violence is the sudden shock of a shootout while you are trapped in an alleyway with nowhere to take cover. It's being held at gunpoint because of a piece of bread in your hand. Violence is not being able to take your safety for granted; it's not being given the benefit of the doubt. The educators in this study have seen this violence or witnessed it themselves, and in their classrooms, they create a space where students can begin to imagine a future beyond survival.

Conclusion

In Rio de Janeiro, the violence between drug traffickers, militias, and state actors inflicts a severe toll on the physical and psychological health of both educators and students in conflict zones. Although these individuals take cover when an outbreak of violence occurs, they are still often caught in the middle. Those who manage to escape injury or death are still left with the long-lasting impacts of trauma. I engaged in this study because I wanted to understand the perspectives and experiences of educators who are put in these impossible situations. For this reason, I conducted semi-structured interviews to gain insight about their experiences, the effect of violence on their well-being and that of their students, and the classroom strategies they implemented as a result.

This research addresses a gap in the literature regarding the perspectives of educators in conflict zones; moreover, it contributes to a broader understanding of how individuals exercise their agency despite structural barriers and urban violence in Latin America.

Key Takeaways

Several key takeaways emerged from the interviews. Chapter One focused on the experiences of educators in conflict zones. Their interview responses resulted in several themes, such as the unpredictability of violence, the favela as a war zone, self-sacrifice, trauma, the normalization of violence, and resilience. Armed conflict negatively impacted the well-being of educators, and some of them used psychological support or coping strategies to manage the psychological toll. The educators also demonstrated deep concern regarding the impact that violence had on their students, including the consequences for their mental health and the punishing experience of enduring stigma for being favela residents. In this section, the educators navigated complex feelings of despair and hope, sometimes within the same train of thought.

Their responses highlight that despite teaching in impossible situations, they were still able to locate hope and use it as a driving force for both themselves and their students.

Chapter Two went beyond the educators' experiences with violence and analyzed their pedagogical choices as a result. The educators engaged in different strategies in response to three types of violence: sensational violence, structural violence, and slow violence. They implemented pedagogical strategies to address the acute impact of a violent outbreak in the community, and they also addressed the consequences of more subtle forms of violence whose impacts could compound and inflict long-term effects on the children's well-being and future. Despite the impossible situations that educators were often placed in, they leveraged their agency to reconstitute the classroom as a place of hope. In this way, the classroom became a site of resistance.

Future Research and Policy Recommendations

Due to the limited number of studies that analyze the impact of teaching in conflict zones, future research should focus on the development of more qualitative studies that analyze the perspectives of educators in a range of contexts. Moreover, future research should also assess the long-term psychological impact of teaching in conflict zones, including its psychological toll and the prevalence of PTSD among affected educators. While the educators in the present study shared their perspectives regarding how violence had affected their students, more studies should interview the students first-hand to uncover their points of view. Because children are a vulnerable population, these studies should be designed and implemented with extreme caution and care.

This study highlights the urgent need for social and policy change. Many innocent bystanders continue to endure the effects of an undeclared war in Rio de Janeiro. Much of the

state response has been reactionary, such as cancelling classes when armed conflicts erupt. However, there is a need for comprehensive reform across a broad range of areas: education, policing, the criminal justice system, and the provision of public services. Although the educators in the present study did everything within their power to safeguard their students, these systemic problems should not be their burden to bear. While favelas continue to be perceived as outside of the city, and while the state of exception continues to justify the use of increasing levels of violence in these communities, these individuals will continue to face extreme hardships and even danger in their line of work. Serious disruptions are needed to re-allocate funding and resources to communities that have been historically underserved. Educators deserve a safe work environment, and students deserve to access their right to an education.

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