

Local Roots: social work in a violent community in Brazil

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The work of *Raízes Locais* can best be illustrated by exploring stories of individuals who have participated in it, such as the case of Cleo and her children (pictured here). Photo • Courtesy *Associação Brasileira Terra dos Homens*

The *Associação Brasileira Terra dos Homens* (ABTH) works to improve parenting in Mangueirinha, an especially violent area of Rio de Janeiro. This article explores the social work approach of the *Raízes Locais* ('Local Roots') programme, illustrated through the stories of two of the mothers who participated.

The *Raízes Locais* programme was created in 2008 by the *Associação Brasileira Terra dos Homens*. It aims to promote the development of Mangueirinha, a community with nearly 10,000 inhabitants in the Duque de Caxias municipality of Baixada Fluminense, a region of the state of Rio de Janeiro.

The programme began after an ABTH investigation showed that most of the children living on the streets in Rio de Janeiro came from Mangueirinha. The region is recognised by the public security authorities as the most violent in the area. In 2009, ABTH studied the socio-economic situation of Mangueirinha and devised the *Raízes Locais* approach, including elements of psychosocial support, street art and culture, income management, kindergarten education, social mobilisation and political advocacy.

ABTH has a house at the entrance to the community where about 200 children and 80 families meet to participate in activities. Though it started work in this

community in 2008, ABTH has carried out social work to strengthen the families of children and adolescents since 1996. Over those last 18 years, a work methodology has been developed which has proved successful in more than 80% of the cases dealt with.

The methodology understands the family as a system: when one individual seeks support, the whole family must be supported. Methods of support include interviews (both with individual members of the family and combinations of members, such as couples, parents with children, etc.), home visits, parent groups and networking with social services. The methods vary as each case develops, according to the family's specific needs. The emphasis is on dialogue, trust and the preservation of each person's autonomy.

Staff members work with families to develop tools called the genogram and the ecomap. The genogram analyses interactions among the family's different generations, and the ecomap analyses how the family interacts with systems such as the crèche, church, entertainment, friends, neighbours, medical services and housing. Graphically visualising these relationships helps to develop structured intervention measures.

The work of *Raízes Locais* can best be illustrated by exploring stories of individuals who have participated in it. Antonia and Cleo came to the programme in different ways, but both experienced the problem of difficulty in creating bonds with their children. Participating in the programme gave them a new perspective on these relationships. Antonia and Cleo's stories are just two among many which show that ABTH's social work methodology can strengthen responsive parenting and reduce the risk of violence within the family.

Antonia

Antonia joined the programme in 2008, when she was 27 years old and had two children: Caio, aged 5, and Camila, aged 1. Her relationship with her children was not good. Her own upbringing had been difficult: her biological mother died during childbirth,

and her adoptive mother was violent. She moved to Mangueirinha and met Robson, to whom she was married for 10 years. He had a drugs habit, which made him aggressive; though he wanted to give up, he lacked the strength to do so.

The ABTH team took the family in and verified their need for systematic support. To understand how Robson's drug habit affected the family, the team discussed it with Antonia on her own, with Antonia and Robson together, and with the children, both separately and together with their mother. Antonia attended income management centres, which helped her to learn new ways of managing her income and increased her self-esteem. Her relationship with her children improved, and so did their school performance.

Through support from the team, Antonia's husband began treatment and got a job. However, he relapsed. One evening when Robson was in a violent mood and looking for Antonia, Caio told his father where she was and Robson tried to kill her. Antonia escaped and took refuge outside the community. Robson sold the family's house to pay off his drug-related debts, but the team managed to get the house back for Antonia and her children.

Antonia blamed Caio for telling his father where she was that night, and Caio blamed Antonia for causing the separation from his father. Antonia became violent towards Caio. The team intervened to repair this bond through activities designed to stimulate interaction between parents and children and strengthen their relationship. During one of those meetings, Antonia and Caio each chose a musical instrument and sang a song together. Antonia confessed that it was the first time she had managed to see her son as a child.

ABTH introduced play as a technique in the meetings between parents and their children as it establishes a channel of communication between them. Through play, a child 'comes into contact with his fantasies, desires and feelings, becomes aware of the strength and limits of his own body and establishes relationships of

trust with others' (Rede Nacional Primeira Infância, 2010: 52).

Antonia's behaviour has changed. She has become calmer, more patient and more able to resolve difficulties through talking. She has created a healthy and non-violent environment for her children. In the process of working with Antonia, the team realised that she has high levels of intelligence, understanding and critical thinking skills. They invited her to be trained as a crèche assistant, and she began to work with children aged 2–6 as part of the programme.

Cleo

When Cleo joined the programme she was 37 years old and had four children (three girls and one boy) from two marriages. She earned an income by collecting materials for recycling, taking her children with her as she had nobody to leave them with. Ana, her eldest daughter, was 9 years old and had been looking after her two younger brothers since she was 5. She experienced difficulties concentrating at school and had to repeat a year. When Ana started to commit petty theft, that prompted Cleo to ask for help from the programme.

The ABTH team worked with her to make a genogram of her family – a graphic model of the relationships among family members of various generations, and 'a rich source of hypothesis in trying to understand how the problems that the family encounters can be put in context' (ABTH, 2013: 26). While drawing up the genogram, it became clear that Cleo had much better relationships with the men in her family than with the women. She mentioned that she was very attached to her father and in conflict with her mother, she was close to her brothers, and she valued her only son more than her daughters, calling him the 'prince of the house'.

Cleo was trained in an alternative way of generating income, by making and selling fruit juice lollies. Meanwhile, her younger children attended the programme's educational assistance activities for 2–6 year olds. Ana attended too, to look after her siblings, and the team observed that she was very mature for her

age. They encouraged her to read stories to the rest of the children, and gradually she improved her performance at school and stopped engaging in petty theft. But it became clear that she felt furious at her mother for having burdened her with responsibility for her siblings instead of letting her enjoy her childhood.

Through her work with the team, Cleo came to understand that the treatment she complained about from her own mother was being replicated in the way she was behaving with her daughters. Realising this, Cleo spontaneously got in touch with her mother and tried to rescue their relationship. She also became willing to work at her relationship with Ana, whose participation in programme activities such as theatre, *capoeira* and singing helped to mend their relationship. Also, as Cleo is illiterate, she felt proud of Ana because of her ability to read. When both mother and daughter rediscovered their natural roles, Ana was able to recover her childhood and to once again play her role as a daughter, strengthening the bonds with her mother.

Integration with government services

An NGO that experiments with innovative methods in its fieldwork must have a mission to pass its knowledge on to the government and promote constant communication with official decision-making structures, as only then will the accumulated experience be multiplied in an efficient and lasting way. ABTH's staff therefore work on political advocacy, requesting governmental services to act in a more integrated and participative way. There is a clear need for proactive community services which promote integration between health, education, social assistance, entertainment, work and housing activities.

References

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