

Youth political subjectivities and critical interculturality

Subjetividades políticas juveniles e Interculturalidad crítica

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Abstract

This article gathers the most important findings that show the configuration of political subjectivities, of young people from Medellín and the Metropolitan Area, and their articulation with critical interculturality. It is based on an investigation whose objective was to investigate the looks that young people belonging to two entities of Medellín in Colombia with social bets from the performing arts and the appropriation of knowledge, have built on themselves and their relationships with others. The study was raised methodologically from autobiographical narratives as a way of approaching young people and their stories. Among the main results are aspects related to the ways in which they are assumed and projected in collective action and how opportunities arise there to recognize and overcome the problems of inequality that are going through their lives. The most important conclusions are about how political subjectivity and its plots are articulated with critical interculturality from youth settings in urban contexts such as those in cities like Medellín.

Keywords

Politics, youth, cultural research.

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Resumen

Este artículo recoge los hallazgos más importantes que evidencian la configuración de subjetividades políticas, de jóvenes de Medellín y el Área Metropolitana, y su articulación con la interculturalidad crítica. Toma como base una investigación cuyo objetivo fue indagar sobre las miradas que los jóvenes pertenecientes a dos entidades de Medellín en Colombia con apuestas sociales desde las artes escénicas y la apropiación del conocimiento, han construido sobre sí mismos y sus relaciones con otros. El estudio se planteó metodológicamente desde las narrativas autobiográficas como forma de acercarse a los jóvenes y sus historias. Entre los resultados principales se plantean aspectos relacionados con las formas cómo se asumen y proyectan en la acción colectiva y cómo emergen allí oportunidades para reconocer y superar las problemáticas de desigualdad que atraviesan sus vidas. Las más importantes conclusiones están en torno a cómo se articulan la subjetividad política y sus tramas con la interculturalidad crítica desde los escenarios juveniles en contextos urbanos como los de ciudades como Medellín.

Palabras clave

Política, joven, investigación cultural.

Introduction

Although youth is a socially constructed category (Bourdieu, 1978/1990), power relations and social classifications cannot be ignored, which in some contexts place young people in subordinate positions. In the investigation from which this article emerges, the question about the ways in which the participants of two institutions¹, based on the performing arts and the social appropriation of knowledge, handle these differences and inequalities in the collective scenario arises. The objective of the research was to investigate the meanings that eight young people grant to their participation in these spaces; problematizing the relationship between political subjectivity and critical interculturality from the void found around the articulation of these two theoretical categories. As well as, from the eyes that the young

¹ *Semillero teatral de la Corporación Arlequín and Juglares y Talleristas Universidad de los niños EAFIT*. Which from now on will be named, respectively, like this: AJ and UN.

people themselves, based on these experiences, have constructed on themselves and their relationships with others.

Following Alvarado (2014), in this research, we start by recognizing young people as beings with multiple ways of being and understanding the world, which beyond their age, have the possibility of being powerful subjects of transformation, “protagonists of the construction of dynamics and meanings of citizenship” (Alvarado, 2014, p. 23). In this sense, we are interested in Critical Interculturality addressed by Walsh (2006, 2008, 2009):

(...) process, project, and strategy (..) that puts racialization, subalternization and inferiorization and its patterns of power into continuous questioning, visualizes different ways of being, living and knowing, and seeks the development and creation of understandings and conditions that not only articulate and establish dialogue between the differences in a framework of legitimacy, dignity, equality, fairness, and respect, but also, at the same time, encourage the creation of other ways of thinking, being, learning, teaching, dreaming, and living that They cross borders. (Walsh, 2009 pp. 91-92).

This author is the axis of reflection on this category given her powerful approach, questioning the modern colonial conformations and the impacts of the logic of capitalism on human and non-human lives and on the relationships established between different cultural groups and with the same nature. The foregoing, bearing in mind the substantial differences existing with multiculturalism as a neoliberal way of understanding difference from consumption or otherization, but not from the real possibility of intercultural dialogue, encounter, and joint existence.

And it is in that dialogue precisely where we find political subjectivity (Alvarado, 2014), as an opportunity to continue understanding Critical Interculturality and its articulation with the constructions that young subjects make of themselves. We understand then by political subjectivity “the expression of meanings and actions that each individual constructs on his being and being in the world, from interaction with others, in particular socio-historical contexts” (Alvarado, Patiño & Loaiza, 2012, p 859), from active agency and autonomous thinking, while interacting with others in collective projects that tend to the common good.

This implies questioning the relationships that are established in the ways in which social groups, in this case of young people, organize their life

in common, from their beliefs, meanings and daily practices. As Arroyo Ortega and Alvarado (2017) point out:

Consequently, it is necessary to reflect on the meeting points that are configured around political subjectivity and that are not only in the theory, but they are also generated in life forms, in connections between different human groups, in localized and territorialized possibilities of the concrete subjects. (p. 235)

Methodological process

With Luna (2015) we understand that questions about subjectivity are necessarily determined by the recognition of the meanings that subjects construct from the world from interaction with others. Characteristic that led us to consider the autobiographical narratives as a methodological alternative for the understanding of subjectivity, because according to Bolívar and Porta (2010, p. 204), through these “social phenomena can be understood as texts, whose value and meaning is given by the self-interpretation that the actors give of about them”. In the same line, Delory-Momberger (2009) allows us to recognize that human beings, being immersed in experiences, find it difficult to identify the knowledge or learning they promote. That is why we need to convert them into text: formalize them, remember them, organize them - through oral or written stories, drawings, graphs or tables - to achieve then, “a work of conceptualization of the experience destined to transform the raw knowledge of the action into formalized and recognized knowledge ”(Delory-Momberger, 2009, p. 97).

Therefore, following Amador Báquiro (2016, pp. 1316-1317), “it seems necessary to analyze the tendency of young people to produce narratives, since for some researchers they break the continuum of social life, while for others it is a strategy that articulates subjective time with social and historical time”, reasons why the research in question opted for narratives as a methodological alternative.

The choice of youth groups was made taking into account two characteristics they share: One of them has to do with the conscious commitment of each institution to promote the value of difference, on equal terms and opportunities, as the core value among its participants. A second particularity

is that each group has social goals where collective work represents a key factor in achieving their intentions.

Based on the above, five meetings were held with the young people, which were recorded through a tape recorder and subsequently transcribed, with a previous conversation about informed consent and its corresponding signature. The organization of the information and the interpretation process was composed of several moments: transcription of the individual interviews, identification, and organization of the stories of each experience, construction of matrices to relate the stories of each participant with the objectives of the project, intertextual reading of the stories, recognition of the findings and a final writing of them. For this article and taking into account the length of the narratives, only the key aspects of two stories will be exposed.

In that same sense and from an ethical perspective of approaching young people, the researchers were positioned as critical companions of the narrative process, without ignoring existing asymmetry relationships, but trying to reduce them from a horizontal scenario, not only comprised of the used techniques, but first and foremost of the relationships that were developed, in which respect for their stories, their times and possibilities and even their silences and ways of expressing themselves prevailed.

Results

Jesus²: reinventing oneself day by day as an expression of political resistance

In the quest to qualify as an urban artist, Jesus arrives at the AJ Corporation to participate in a musical training process. There he recorded his first song, an event that he remembers as one of the main motivations for choosing art as a life option: “it was a great start for me because I did not expect to start recording one”. Subsequently, in order to explore theater to merge it with music and give a differential value to his work, he decides to join the Theater Seedbed of the same corporation where, in addition to training in

2 All ethical considerations of confidentiality and anonymity were handled, all young people wanted to appear with their name in the stories.

technical aspects, it strengthens his perception of himself and his creative ability to constantly reinvent himself, dignify himself as an artist and legitimize his dreams.

One of the most significant experiences that Jesus highlights from his process has to do with the catharsis that allowed him to set up a play, where he was able to externalize “the shit, the negative, the kicks one receives from life”, in his case, the abandonment of his parents, the mistreatment of his family, the emotional breakups, the lack of resources to solve his basic needs, among other realities, which were symbolized through “a blind character and a bond that does not let it move forward.” This poetic image leads him to understand the need to free himself from resentment and anger in order to resignify his sorrows, walk lighter and strengthen his life story, which although marked by multiple painful events gave him the possibility of being in continuous observation of himself and discover his strength to reinvent himself, developing from the everyday resistance as a political way to continue living, establishing “breakpoints as centers of political resistance of greater importance, since they attack the logic of the system, not an abstraction, but as lived experience” (Guattari & Rolnik, 2006, p. 60). Conceiving his autonomy, in the ability to transform fears into creative ways to rescue the meaning of life and resignify everyday life.

The resistance and autonomy then configure the political subjectivity of Jesus, and it is the theatrical seedbed a sample of this, where he highlights the possibility that he finds to be authentic, share and talk about any subject: “Since we arrived everyone is sharing their opinion, we are who we are, there are no masks, it is total madness.” He also emphasizes that being in the middle of this difference of thoughts and experiences, has allowed him to have more openness for teamwork, interact without reservations, transform imaginaries and generate welcoming spaces for his colleagues as they have done with him “that warmth that one feels very nice, not as in other spaces where the pupi with the pupi and that of the popular neighborhood with that of the popular neighborhood... no, here is totally different”, a statement that shows a process of permanent negotiation and solidarity between the participants, fundamental for the construction of a collective political fabric given as Guattari and Rolnik express it:

From the moment in which the groups acquire that freedom to live their own processes, they have the capacity to read their own situation and what hap-

pens around them. That capacity is what will give them a minimum of creative possibility and will allow them to preserve that important character of autonomy. (2006, p. 61)

On the other hand, recognizing oneself not from the position of victim but as a political subject that can also contribute to the transformation of their context, especially from art as a tool to raise awareness about love, peace, and respect for difference, is Jesus' political commitment that transcends the search for individual well-being to propitiate in other youths questions and reflections on their own realities:

I always try to express a very positive or critical message. For example, that there should be more equity, more opportunities, more access to universities, speaking to the country that it should not be afraid of change.

Realizing a horizon of political action that would be in line with the idea of Guattari and Rolnik (2006) of a molecular revolution, which is not only focused on social protest, but that explains political action in everyday life, in desire, in relationships, that is:

The molecular revolution consists in producing the conditions not only of collective life, but also of the incarnation of life for itself, both in the material field and in the subjective field. (Guattari & Rolnik, 2006, p. 62)

Questioning, in some way, the values administered by neoliberal capitalism, from a positive affirmation of love, creativity, art and social criticism as forms of political resistance.

Jesus seeks to construct coherence between what he does and promotes through his creations, providing an account of historical awareness as a fundamental feature of political subjectivity (Alvarado, Ospina, Botero & Muñoz, 2008) that he has achieved in his experience, since that despite the socio-economic deficiencies that he faces in his daily life, he has resisted with conviction against the option of resolving them by illegal means, generating resistance to the mechanisms of violence that appear strongly in cities such as Medellín or similar environments; finding in art, other languages not only to generate communication spaces, but above all for reflexivity, autonomy and historical awareness that have to do "with the possibility of deciding and acting in the social contexts in which young people and all

those with whom they interact, get involved, and with the “ways of sharing power” (Cubides, 2004, p. 122)

Therefore, clinging to what makes him vibrate and in which he finds political power for his encounter with others: music and theater, Jesus walks with hope, resignifying his history, challenging the problems of his daily life and defining New roads to travel: “I don’t want to pretend to be an artist, I want to train myself, to show that although I come from below I can have the same quality as anyone who came out of the best universities or had the resources, live from it, but live well.” Focused on what he wants, he is always looking, writing, thinking, meditating, that is his way of reinventing himself day by day to be a better artist and a better human being. Noting that this living well, not only involves his own well-being, but also the work he does with other young people, the constant reflection on what happens and what happens to him, making explicit the desire of young people “to reconfigure the idea of youth like the moment of social moratorium or irresponsibility, and show the daily struggles that many young people have to insert themselves into social life and generate emancipation processes from there” (Arroyo Ortega, 2018, p. 178), which increasingly necessary In today’s societies.

Susana: Experience reflexivity about oneself for the pedagogical-political encounter with others

Although Susana was born in Medellín, a few months later she went with her family to Monteria, an issue that shapes several aspects of her life, among them, the consideration that her relationship with other people and with knowledge needed to exposed to different conditions: I went with the flow, my studies, the house and that. I liked to read but kinda didn’t”. She remembers to be very shy as a child and, although she was characterized as a very good student, according to her, she went unnoticed. For Susana, returning to Medellín was an “awakening to the world.” At the beginning of her university experience, she began to realize that “being so withdrawn was not going to achieve anything” she knew that studying an undergraduate involved something else. This is how entering to University represents an opportunity to continue responding to her personal desire to grow.

Susana began this process believing that her role was to teach. This frightened her since she was not very clear about her interest in the knowled-

ge she had acquired in her undergraduate or the articulation between them and the themes that motivated the program's workshops. Over time, and in the interaction with the participants, she understands that the biggest challenge in the framework of an educational process is to arouse curiosity. And to achieve this, she has the certainty that motivating it in herself is a fundamental link: "one is always growing in that sense, what am I going to ask, what am I going to do so that the child is left with that subject itching in his head? In this understanding of her role, features of an educational practice that takes into account the subjectivities of the participants is evident, and she understands the pedagogical as architecture from the desire, from the construction of a joint passion to learn, as expressed by Freire and Faundez (2014):

The curiosity of the student can sometimes shake the teacher's certainty. This is why, by limiting the student's curiosity, the authoritative teacher is also limiting his. Many times, on the other hand, the question the student asks about the subject - when he is free to ask it - can give the teacher a different angle, which will be possible to deepen later in a more critical reflection. (p. 2)

In addition to a workshop, Susana had the opportunity to participate as the protagonist of a play set-up that marked her stay in the program: "That was one of the most important things in my life because it was a challenge that I never thought I would do." The character was a young woman who, when talking in dreams with Socrates, recognizes the value of self-oriented curiosity. This finding of the character moves to Susana, who considers it necessary to know and take care of herself to avoid living automatically and be consistent with what she thinks and does: "one has to inquire into oneself, not just know about the world. If you are aware of yourself, you realize that things are always happening to you that you should not ignore."

By accepting this challenge, she was able to transcend fear and, above all, the perception that others and herself had of not being able to stand in front of an audience: When you manage to meet your challenges, overcome your fears, that makes you stronger and understanding that meeting others, so similar to her and at the same time so different, constructing other forms of relationship, which leads us to think with Arroyo Ortega that "it is in the daily life where interculturality materializes and is not in any way a given fact, but a joint construction of subjects and groups, which is not without tension" (2016, p. 58).

On the other hand, the understandings that she achieves about herself and the recognition of curiosity as a fundamental axis for the relationship with knowledge, also allow her to resignify her interest in her undergraduate and visualize other professional horizons, for example, articulate science, education, and communication, generating a process that goes far beyond the usual considerations about the educational processes of training and trying to weave articulations from knowledge and education as a political possibility of building vital meaning.

This empowerment allows her to assume an attitude that transcends the fact of identifying problems and from a conscious and critical posture to get involved in the development of actions with which she can influence her context, expanding her reflective action framework not only to what happens to her but to a deep concern for the world, for the others with whom she co-exists, thinking and living the educational scenarios of which she is part as a great collective action that builds from the reflective feeling that crosses her.

The common: education as a possibility to overcome the social inequalities that young people currently face

Inequality of opportunities is a subject that crosses the reflections of the young participants and is, according to them, the most urgent issue to transform in Colombia. This has been evidenced not only through their own experiences but also in the encounter with young people, boys, and girls of different economic, educational and/or labor situations that in many cases have allowed them to glimpse the exclusions and inequities that cross the social and educational spaces in the country.

They consider then, as a first step to begin to overcome this imbalance, to get out of indifference and ignorance regarding the realities that are lived in other contexts and transcend prejudices. Among the problems they recognize in themselves and in other young people, there is the inequality of educational opportunities evidenced, through their personal experience, in the complications to pass the selection process in universities; in the difficulty to find work possibilities that are articulate the schedules and the academic requirements; in the ignorance or emotional disconnection with what they think or do.

These concerns make a lot of sense in the framework of educational homogenization processes that do not recognize the subjective and cultural sin-

gularities that in many cases remain in the operation of educational multiculturalism of a neo-liberal nature that focuses on a supposed meritocracy but does not analyze or seek to transform the unequal material conditions of existence that young people, boys, and girls face in their daily lives. This means that, when trying to enter educational or labor processes, they have wide disadvantages with peers who have had other and better access or vital conditions.

For many young people in the country, such as some of the participants in the research process, who presented twice to public universities in try to access theater and music-related programs without success despite what they had been doing in their participation in the respective spaces related to these arts. The education system of the best public universities becomes unattainable when the preparation during the school years does not respond to the requests for admission and there is a gap between the educational processes generated for the poor and those generated for the elites of Colombia or there is a devaluation of the titles obtained regarding the labor demand (Ministry of National Education 2016; Misas Arango, 2016) as it happens in other countries of Latin America, before which it is prudent to remember with Guattari (2008), that:

It is necessary to admit that the persistence of misery is not a simple residual factual state, more or less passively suffered by rich societies. Poverty is loved by the capitalist system that uses it as a lever to move and dispose of the collective labor force. The individual is led to bend to urban disciplines, to wage requirements or to income from capital. (p. 221)

On the other hand, for those who access a university, but do not have economic and emotional support from close relatives, the situation is quite difficult. In the first place, because they need to find a job that not only allows them to sustain themselves but also leaves them with enough time to respond to their academic obligations. Second, because they do not find emotional support that helps them stay and go through the demands that this process entails, conditions that are recognized as the main factors of the educational desertion of young people in the city (Leyva, 2015).

However, of the eight young participants in the research, who did have the possibility of accessing educational, economic and emotional opportunities, they also express their own battles against the educational system. They acknowledge having acquired the necessary knowledge to memorize and pass exams, but they did not have the opportunity to arouse interest in

the knowledge of the world and of themselves. A subject that is related to what is evidenced in the analysis carried out by Leyva (2015) in which poor methodologies and pedagogies, the existence of professors with little training and vocation and physical spaces where the emphasis is on teaching, not learning are recognized as the shortcomings of the current education system.

In this sense, for some of these young people it implied the perception that their language or their ways of understanding and expressing themselves did not fit with the hegemonic ways of institutionality, especially when:

Science and education in its more traditional aspect (...) has made knowledge and worldviews different from these perspectives, but above all the subjects that possess them, are considered inferior. (Arroyo Ortega, 2016, p. 57)

This is how the experience in the two institutions in which they generate their artistic and/or pedagogical action has implied for these young people the possibility of generating a collective action that, in turn, gave them the motivation to know and be aware of themselves. And from this recognition, they manage to build their own path to understand and inhabit the world, exploring reflexivity as a key element of political subjectivity from their own experiences.

Reflexivity appears centrally in the stories of young people not only as personal growth that was developed in a particular time-space, but also given the propitious environment generated in the collective spaces in which it was possible to look, listen and speak from their construction processes of being young with others like them. Secondly, participating in pedagogical and/or artistic meetings, on equal terms, with people of different socio-economic and cultural realities, has allowed them to glimpse interculturality, as a possibility of meeting with different knowledge, subjects, practices, and feelings that enrich them.

In this sense, we critically recognize that there is still a lack of understanding of interculturality in the young participants as well as in society as a whole:

As a project and process with a view to the re-foundation of the foundations of the nation and national culture - understood as homogeneous and monocultural - to not simply add diversity to what is established, but to rethink and rebuild making the intercultural - and the work of interculturalizing - be central axis and task. (Walsh, 2010, p. 221)

However, it is also important to highlight that from their ethical-political bets there are greater understandings of the power of cultural differences that lead them to recognize collective responsibilities in the city and as in the encounter with the situation of others, and understand each other and overcome prejudices.

Discussion and conclusions: Political subjectivity and critical interculturality in the experience of young people

The life of the young participants in the research is crossed by the experiences in both programs and the experiences that in terms of political action and intercultural they have encountered in them. In this way, the transformation of the meanings that they grant to issues such as their work as artists or workshop workers, their personal history, collective action, their professional interests and the way they are affected by the problems of social inequality that are lived in the country, especially in Medellín, allow us to highlight features of political subjectivity that are manifested in the perceptions they have about themselves, the actions that influence the relationships they weave with others and their intercultural articulation.

Perceptions of their work as artists or workshop workers are not the same as that with which they entered each program: today art is their tool for healing deep fears, anger and sorrows; to understand and transform their relationships; to express and project through it. Issues that we could articulate to the search for an intercultural education, from the critical position of Walsh, where the pedagogical “is not thought in the instrumentalist sense of the teaching and transmission of knowledge (...) are pedagogical scenarios of learning, unlearning, relearning, reflection and action” (Walsh, 2013 p. 10). This is how young people recognize the value of connecting and listening to their own questions and understand that the answers are not outside, rather start from themselves and are constructed with others.

In this sense, the act of looking at each other encourages “the creation of ‘other’ ways - of thinking, being, learning, teaching, dreaming and living” (Walsh, 2010 p. 13), which becomes evident when young people highlight the effects of this methodological strategy on their individual and collective growth. This is how in this matter of looking at each other, narrating and reflecting on what has been experienced, they conceive of themselves as more

conscious and therefore calmer, sure of what they have been and what they can become. What coincides with the reflexivity, constitutive of the political subjectivity that in Alvarado (2014) implies achieving awareness of oneself, that is, positioning ourselves in the present, recognizing the particular ways in which we build our own meanings of the world.

Teamwork becomes also a fundamental pillar of their experience since it is precisely in doing with others and others where the discourses and imaginary that we build in the face of our relationships are revealed and confronted. This also has to do, with what Walsh (2010, p. 92), from his critical intercultural stance, questions about subalternization, inferiorization and domination patterns. Actions that are only possible when in that game between what differentiates us and what makes us equal we recognize that the senses and identity appropriations are not exhausted in the biography itself, but that they take us to each other, that is, they make us political subjects (Alvarado, 2014, p. 48).

Being able to assume themselves as protagonists of their own history, coupled with the exchange of knowledge and experiences and the enjoyment of the work as workshop workers or artists, also enabled young people to connect with the professional certainties that inspire their life projects. In this sense, a feature of political subjectivity emerges in them, which refers to the ability to relate their history and learning from themselves and the world with the possibility of projecting and continuing to walk with hope, despite the ups and downs, that is, to be assumed as historical and contextualized subjects “capable of thinking and interacting with others in the construction of collective projects oriented to the consensual good that they configure as an expectation of the future” (Alvarado, 2014, p. 48).

This that allows them to overcome the imaginaries that were built because of ignorance and indifference, as Walsh (2008, p. 140) says regarding constructing critical interculturality, it is necessary to make visible, understand and confront domination patterns from our own scenarios, exclusion, inequality, as well as the conflict that these relationships and conditions generate. This is how awareness and real interest for the other with whom the city is shared is broadened, which seems to be related to what Alvarado (2014, p. 36) describes as broadening the ethical circle: “An ethic of care that transcends the spaces of the private and daily life of people and their closest relationships, assuming responsibility and care for society in general.”

Finally, it is important to point out that there is a significant integration of the expansion of youth political subjectivity with a critical commitment to

their intercultural environment and in the stories of the young participants of the research and that, although the expressions of said political intercultural action processes are diverse, the scenarios of youth encounter to which they are attached appear as an opportunity for agency coming from creation and epistemic dissatisfaction with respect to the ways in which inequalities are drawn from the modern colonial system. In this sense, they recognize their daily scenarios as places of political action and youth struggles, as spaces for political construction that questions daily subalternizations that do not recognize different cultural visions or the subjects that embody them. The young participants in this research make explicit other forms of political action, of expanding their political subjectivity from a critical perspective but also focused on self-discovery, which shows that the intercultural question has nothing to do with others inscribed in the scenario of the pejorativized difference, but with an “us” that questions the widespread idea of depoliticization or youth apathy and that expands their political subjectivity from the construction of relational symbolic frameworks that promotes political awakening and child and youth protagonism as a form of intercultural transformation.

To some extent, the young people of the investigation are venturing into diverse political participation scenarios, different from the established canons, taking up “a political-pedagogical praxis clinging to possibility and hope, and moving towards justice, dignity, freedom and humanization” (Walsh, 2013, p. 27).

We recognize that both bets and their articulation are a moving path because we understand that perceptions about ourselves are in permanent configuration, that political subjectivity is a nascent conceptualization (Alvarado, 2014) and also that “critically understood interculturality does not yet exist. It’s something to construct” (Walsh, 2010, p. 78).

Secondly, we consider that this research contributes to the recognition of young people as “active subjects of discourses and action, capable of authentic and conflicting manifestations in the face of the circumstances they live” (Alvarado, 2014, p. 23). Although they perceive themselves as vulnerable in the face of multiple situations of inequality, they also glimpse the capacity and strength to transform their own lives and their environments.

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