"Everything has a Beginning and an End and we are on our Way": Transformative Agency in the Colombian Preparation for Social Action Program

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INTRODUCTION

For the past four decades, the Colombian *Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias* (Foundation for the Application and Teaching of Science, FUNDAEC) has been designing and supporting the implementation of diverse educational programs in Latin America that attempt to promote the intellectual and spiritual growth of individuals that can collectively work toward the transformation of society (Arbab, Correa, & de Valcarcel, 1988; Correa & Torné, 1995; Murphy-Graham, 2012). In 2006, FUNDAEC began implementing *Preparation for Social Action* (PSA), a non-formal, 10-hour per week program that trains youth (ages

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15–25 years old) to become "promoters of community well-being." In this chapter, we explore the ways in which PSA supports the goal of individual and community transformation through an empirical study that was guided by the following questions: (1) In what ways, if any, does PSA support the development of youth agency? (2) What pedagogical features of PSA seem to foster agency development? Drawing upon qualitative data from a study conducted in 2014, we describe how PSA students develop transformative agency and take action toward individual and community change. Our findings suggest that two central components of the PSA pedagogy are essential in this regard: (1) the explicit focus of the program on taking action, specifically in group-led service activities within their communities and (2) the systematic integration of individual and collective reflection exercises that are part of the curriculum studied.

Historical Overview: FUNDAEC and its Journey from Non-formal to Formal to Non-formal Education

FUNDAEC was created in 1974 and, after decades of work in the field of education, began to implement the PSA program in 2006. In all of its programs, FUNDAEC is concerned with the active participation of communities in the process of social and economic development in their own regions (Arbab, 2000). The organization was conceived, from the beginning, as a development organization (not specific to education) and focused its initial efforts in investigating processes of community life including production on small farms, health-related processes and education.

Alongside its investigations on community processes, FUNDAEC began training an initial group of selected youth from the region with the idea that they could become "engineers in community well-being," a designation that the organization created to describe community leaders that could serve as agents of change in their communities. During their work with this initial cohort, FUNDAEC began to write a series of materials that served as guides for the classes they offered (the basis for the curriculum that was later developed and is currently known as SAT). At the core of these curricular materials was the concept of a "capability" which FUNDAEC defines as "the capacity to think and act in a well-defined sphere of activity and with a well-defined purpose. It requires the understanding of certain interrelated concepts, and the acquisition of a series of skills, abilities and attitudes" (FUNDAEC, 2006, 7).

Parallel to the development of this curriculum, FUNDAEC also explored the best way in which their curriculum could be disseminated. Since the program was aimed at the rural population of Colombia with its own particular challenges, the method of delivery of the program was an important question at the time. In the early 1980s, most rural communities in Colombia did not have access to formal secondary schooling. At the same time, factors such as low population density, lack of trained teachers and the participation of the children and youth of the household in the family's economic activities led to the displacement of many young individuals into bigger towns or cities in search of secondary education. This in turn then had effects on family dynamics and the household economy, an increased disparity between male to female access to education and a disconnect from what was studied in urban schools to the rural reality. It is also important to note that the Colombian context, as a whole, has been affected by decades of civil unrest (particularly in terms of confrontation between diverse guerrilla groups, the military and paramilitary groups, where the civilian population has often found itself caught in the middle of different political, economic and territorial interests) and any organization or program in Colombia has to navigate this reality. In some cases, this has meant being present in certain areas of the country and in other cases not being able to penetrate the vast territory.

In an attempt to address the issues discussed above, FUNDAEC developed a tutorial education methodology that would allow students to study in their home communities. This tutorial system is based on the idea that individuals from the same communities as students can become tutors through a process of well-organized training, which FUNDAEC offers, and can then begin to study those materials with the students in a group setting. FUNDAEC makes important distinctions about their use of the term "tutor":

> The term "tutor" is not synonymous with "facilitator" as the word has come to be used in educational approaches that borrow the terminology from group therapy. The tutor is a trained teacher who knows more than the student. Yet, the teacher is also a learner and does not wield arbitrary authority. Tutors guide the students through the textbooks, raise questions and help find answers, clarify obscure matters, encourage reflection on real-life experience, and supervise experiments and social action. They do not lecture or dictate, but nor are they mere facilitators of group discussion. (FUNDAEC, 2006, 5)

In addition to the tutor, the other essential elements of the system are the study group (which normally has between 10 and 20 students), the texts and the community (where students engage in a variety of service and other applied activities).

With regard to the theoretical underpinnings of FUNDAEC's work, an extensive book explains the framework "capable of guiding educational programs seeking the moral empowerment of students" (Farid-Arbab, 2016, 2). A full description of this framework is beyond the scope of this chapter, although it is important to mention briefly here that the founders of FUNDAEC decided, from the start, *not* to adhere to a particular theory but rather look at theory as a source of insight that would inform their efforts as they engaged in action and reflection. They felt this stance would allow them to learn in conjunction with others without now having to feel bound by one way of approaching their work. Core elements of this conceptual framework are the interrelated set of Bahá'í teachings on the oneness of humankind and the evolution of human society.[1]

The program FUNDAEC developed, over time, became known as *Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial* (Tutorial Learning System, or SAT). In the mid-1990s, the Colombian government deemed SAT "effective and valid" for secondary education, spanning grades 7–12 (and students who complete all 6 years earn a high school diploma) and the following two decades were marked by a substantial expansion of the SAT program, both within Colombia and outside of its borders (Murphy-Graham, 2012). In total, over 300,000 students in Latin America have gone through at least one of the levels of the program.

The expansion of the SAT program, carefully detailed in a recent Brookings Institution case study on how successful learning interventions can go to scale (Kwauk & Perlman-Robinson, 2016), had many positive implications, including the recognition of the program as a formal alternative to high school education. In Colombia and Honduras, the state recognized the "tutors" as official teachers and began to pay their salaries. This has allowed the program to become established in the national context and ensures program sustainability.

However, the growth of the program also resulted in FUNDAEC having to confront the challenges of working with a formal education framework. For example, the Colombian government began to demand that the SAT curriculum include certain elements which were necessary for a high school degree including: Colombian history, physical

education, computer science, moral education, English, etc. FUNDAEC has always allowed the addition of new books outside of the core curriculum, particularly to introduce locally relevant technology or respond to other local needs. However, FUNDAEC grew concerned that the increasing number of required subjects (due to national curricular standards) would slowly dilute the core goals of the program. In some cases, additional national curriculum textbooks were added to the program or in others FUNDAEC's texts were simply replaced. Some implementing organizations have felt the need to go through materials as quickly as possible, minimizing the service projects associated with the texts or the reflections embedded in them, all of which are crucial elements of the curricular design. The program, intended to be flexible so that students could set their own schedules (within a weekly hour target), which would then allow them to be involved in family production activities (farm life), has been boxed into meeting standardized goals, losing some of its innovative aspects which was what had made it successful in the first place.

As a response to this situation, FUNDAEC decided to start a new program, named Preparation for Social Action, which could be considered a "sister program" of SAT. While SAT is intended for the formal, state-sponsored sphere, PSA is non-formal. It does not lead to a credential, but students do receive a "certificate in community well-being." The program currently uses the first 24 books in the SAT program, includes the same elements (tutor, text, group and community) given its greater flexibility, is not addressed to high school students or framed by grades but rather is offered to youth between 15 and 25 years of age who are interested in going through an educational program which allows them to become equipped to be of service to the development of their community. In this manner, FUNDAEC was able to focus the PSA program on the wider purpose of community development and not only focus on formal education (as it does through SAT). The program began its pilot form in the north coast of Colombia in the department of Cordoba in 2006 spread over three communities with a group each: Tambor, Lorica and Tuchín. It has now grown to have over 40 groups and tutors, around 600 students and more than 200 graduates of the program.

For FUNDAEC, the term "community development[2]" refers to the improvement of any of the elements or "pieces" of what it terms "processes of community life." Examples of these processes include those related to the production of small crops and the raising of animals, the

creation and maintenance of service microenterprises, actions directed toward individual and community health and environmental sanitation and the marketing, establishment and flow of funds in a particular community among others (Arbab et al., 1988, 7). As FUNDAEC explains, the overall objective of the PSA program is to improve community life:

> The curriculum for the PSA program is designed to support a clear social purpose that is at the heart of all of FUNDAEC's activities: to improve the well-being of community life. Service to the community is the axis around which its integrated curriculum is built…. In their entirety, the textbooks present a pattern of thinking, attitudes, and behavior which is to be followed in a sequence of research-action-learning activities in a path of service to the community. The path of service, itself, is closely examined and continually adjusted. (FUNDAEC, 2006, 6)

A number of previous academic studies have focused on the positive effects of the SAT program, including how it fosters women's empowerment (Murphy-Graham, 2008, 2010, 2012), increased social responsibility (Honeyman, 2010) and impressive academic outcomes (McEwan, Murphy-Graham, Torres Irribarra, Aguilar, & Rapalo, 2014). Research is only beginning to examine how and if PSA supports the development of capabilities that ultimately lead to individual and collective social change (see Murphy-Graham & Lample, 2014; VanderDussen, 2009).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EDUCATION AND TRANSFORMATIVE AGENCY

"Agency" is a term often debated within a number of disciplines, education included. More recently, the term has also slipped into the discourse of donor and nongovernmental organizations to signal efforts to improve youth participation in civil society (McLeod, 2012). The "bare bones" definition offered by Ahearn (2001) (where agency is the socioculturally constrained capacity to act) captures the idea that all action is socioculturally mediated, but it also (intentionally) leaves a number of questions unanswered, such as can agency be the property of groups? Ahearn advises that a fruitful direction for future research is to distinguish among types of agency—"oppositional agency, complicit agency, or agency of power."

Agency of youth, both young women and men, has become a considerable focus of research. In what ways might young people's culturally constrained capacity to act differ from those of older adults? These questions are explored in a variety of different contexts by DeJaeghere, McCleary, and Josic (2016) who conceptualize youth agency in different social, cultural, economic and political environments. A key tension in research on youth agency is how agency cultivated in school and other educational environments can translate to other contexts such as the labor market, the political sphere and within the cultural constraints of families.

For example, in her work examining youth's experiences in a school in Zambia, Bajaj introduces the term "transformative agency," signifying how youth began to see themselves and act differently within the contexts of their lives and communities. The idea of transformative agency is akin to Freire's assertion that education must heighten students' critical consciousness as they come to analyze their place in an unequal world, a transformative sense of agency can lead to individual and social change (Bajaj, 2009, 553). However, Bajaj finds that youth's sense of agency is dampened when they leave the school environment and face additional constraints of Zambian society: "once cultivated, it might not be a fixed characteristic, but is instead situational" (Bajaj, 2009, 552). We draw upon and provide further thinking regarding the idea of "transformative agency" in our analysis of participant experience in the PSA program, as we were interested in investigating how youth action can begin to transform communities, even beyond the time that youth were studying in PSA.

In addition, to deepening our theoretical understanding of transformative agency, we draw upon Emirbayer and Mische (1998), who explain that it is necessary to "conceptualize human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment," to which they add that "structural contexts of action are themselves temporal as well as relational fields-multiple, overlapping ways of ordering time toward which social actors can assume different simultaneous agentic orientations…" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, 963–964). In this regard, human agency is an individual act but it is also situated in a historical context and occurs over time. Therefore, the individual agent begins to act in his or her own particular environment and within

a determined time frame. In the case of PSA, the consideration of time is an important one, as change can only be seen or determined over time.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Focusing on youth agency is particularly important in the context of Colombia, where youth are vulnerable due to the forced migration and displacement of populations over the last decades. According to Cuesta, the Colombian rural context is defined by three primary characteristics. On the one hand, the fact that despite the country being traditionally agriculturally based, the history of Colombia shows "very little preoccupation by the state for the rural population… which has in turn allowed the war which is present throughout all of the departments of the country" (Cuesta, 2008, 90). Second, possessing land has been "the motive for the large displacement of rural population and it is the reason why many have taken up arms: some to defend and increase their ownership and others to find a reform though insurrection (ibid)." Finally, the levels of poverty in rural areas are higher than urban areas, with 62% of rural population living in poverty and 21.5% living in conditions of absolute poverty (Cuesta, 2008, 90–91). These conditions underscore the need for educational programs that are appropriate for rural environments and have a strong agricultural and anti-poverty agenda, as does PSA. While seeming issues of the past, questions of land ownership and agrarian reform continue to be central in many of the issues Colombia continues to face today. For example, in the context of the current peace process one of the main points in the peace agreements is the emphasis and resources that need to be dedicated to the rural sectors of the country. Rural to urban migration has led to overpopulated cities with their own series of issues and needs which have to be addressed, but if rural areas continue to be ignored the migration and displacement of populations will continue to occur. Therefore, the emphasis on certain plans and policies for urban centers that are different from those for rural areas is a crucial concern in this particular turning point of Colombian policy.

An example of a department which has faced social turmoil and deals with internal migration is the department of Cordoba, where this study took place. Here the population depends greatly on agriculture and cattle farming. Eight percent of all land is used for agricultural purposes. Its population is mixed, with 76.39% being considered white or mestizo, 13.21% are Afro-Colombian and 10.39% are indigenous. According to

national statistics, in 2012 the department had a population of 1.6 million inhabitants. The majority of the population is young with 52% being between the ages of 0 and 25 years old (DANE, 2005). In recent years, FUNDAEC has focused diligently on reaching the age group between 12 and 25 years of age, given the demographics of these communities: "It is FUNDAEC's belief that working with junior youth and youth is the most effective approach, as it creates, in a span of few years, the vital human resources needed to advance other development processes, including early childhood education" (FUNDAEC, 2006).

Methodology

This qualitative study took place in two municipalities (*municipios*) in the north coast region of Colombia, in the department of Cordoba: Lorica and Tuchín. These sites were selected because the program began in those two localities in 2006, and this window of eight years was considered sufficient time to have observed program impacts. Ethnographic fieldwork, including in-depth interviews and participatory observation, was conducted by Correa between January and February, 2014. A total of 47 interviews were conducted with program graduates (11), current students (16), parents (8), tutors (8) and coordinators (4). In conducting interviews with multiple stakeholders in the program, we were able to triangulate our findings (Creswell, 1998). Each interview lasted between one and two hours and was conducted in homes or public places. There was a separate interview guide for each category of research participant, but all explored the student experience in PSA, whether or not they perceived changes, what motivated them to study in the program, and their community activities and involvement.

We acknowledge a few potential sources of bias in this study. First, due to safety concerns and the geographic inaccessibility, interviews were pre-arranged by program coordinators. This may mean that only the "best" cases were selected. Second, often other family members (particularly mothers) were present during interviews with youth. Finally, Correa works for FUNDAEC and study participants were for the most part aware of this. These three features of the research may have skewed our findings because only positive experiences with PSA were shared. At the same time, we make no claims about the "representativeness" of these results or the sample. We acknowledge that experiences in the program will be variable, and that these might be best-case scenarios or

"revelatory cases" (Yin, 2003, 43) that help us to understand how and if PSA sparks social change and agency.

All of the interviews were transcribed and organized in a database, and the transversal questions present in all of the questionnaires were closely looked at. It became apparent that certain key words were present in most interviews, and this allowed for the categorization of these elements. Among these elements, the themes of change and motivation stood out. At the same time, these elements belonged to three distinct categories: the individual, the family and the community and the information could further be organized accordingly.

PSA as an Educational Resource for Agency

While education has been identified as a way to better equip individuals to act in ways that can improve their communities, untangling the relationship between education and agency is complicated. What specific resources can help support the development of agency? How can education promote individual and collective action? Here we further clarify how education can promote transformative agency (Bajaj, 2009). As individuals begin to act in certain ways, others take note, and are inspired by their actions. They believe that they, too, can take action. As individual agency spreads from student to student and to other members of the community, participants become aware of how PSA has led to a process of individual and community change, which are defining features of transformative agency. Consistent with FUNDAEC's assertion regarding the twofold moral purpose of education (personal transformation and social transformation), we found that PSA participants described changes at the level of the individual and changes in their communities.

Individual Change: Cultivating New Ways of Being and Thinking

PSA participants (both students and tutors) described ways in which their experiences in PSA influenced their attitudes, behavior and their modes of thinking. For example, one tutor (who was previously a student in the program) explained that he changed in a number of ways that allow him to work more effectively with others. These changes centered around his ability to listen and learn from others and to interact in ways that are not "rude":

My character was very strong. The program helped change that. Learning to have different ideas, learning to listen to others. Every person has their own point of view. Before, I used always to defend my point of view even though I knew I was wrong. That is why the program helped me, to realize that what I said sometimes was not right…. Even my mom would say to me…you have changed. You don't talk back to me anymore and you are not as rude as you used to be, and that would help me to realize that it was true, that I was changing.

Another student explained that participation in PSA changed his mode of thinking, which has also influenced his relationship with others. The student explained:

The most important thing I have learned is to live in my community. Learning *how to live with those around me*. To be patient towards others. I wasn't like this before. I wasn't tolerant…I am not the same as when I was starting out, my way of thinking is different. The difference is that I have learned how to deal with my temper. Because I had a really strong temper, everything bothered me. My way of being (*forma de ser*) is better, my way of treating others. I am a more patient person. So all of this has helped me as a person.

This new way of being was also linked to new ways of thinking and speaking. The participant continued:

There has been change, in my way of thinking and acting. My thoughts before were like those of a child. But now I think, and I have new ideas. The things that I say go further and are not so elemental. I used to speak about silly things, but now I talk about interesting subjects, things that make sense.

Participants described internal changes in their ways of thinking and in their attitudes. These internal changes were linked to their interactions with others. These changes were not only described by participants themselves but were confirmed by other members of the community: by their parents and tutors. Some tutors described that their students were more responsible and patient with themselves and toward others. They also developed practical skills such as time management. One tutor described the change in the following manner:

> The difference is that they have learned to become more responsible. They are also more tolerant with themselves. When they began in the program there was a lot of tension between them [the students] … When a problem arises they are able to talk to each other. They are more responsible with their parents, with their responsibilities. They used to get to class late, or not go because they had school work, but now they know how to manage their time better. And they can work with the community. They did not engage with the community before, but now they do, all of this through the acts of service.

This tutor continued to describe a specific example in which she saw student behavior change. In the first few weeks of the program, they would throw their trash in the middle of the classroom even though there was a trash can nearby. They would leave the class and not pick up after themselves. However, as time went by she began to notice that they started to use the trash can in the classroom. They also shared with her that they had begun to do the same thing at home, using a trash can for the first time. In her analysis, this stemmed from their increased responsibility and awareness of their surroundings. This increased sense of responsibility and respect for others was particularly apparent in two domains: their family and the classroom. "The truth is that some of the students did not show love or respect towards their parents. As they went through the program, one could see the changes…They stopped being so vulgar and rude with their classmates." Individual changes of this nature, albeit small, have significant implications for these individuals, their families and communities, because these changes allow students to think differently about their relationships with others.

Another example which on the surface seems simple, but has profound implications, is how participants described their willingness to learn from and incorporate ideas from others in the group. One tutor explained how when he went to training sessions, he had already completed the exercises in the books with his answers and thoughts. When it came time to review those answers with the group and trainer, he initially found himself unwilling to change his answers, even though he knew they were wrong. He thought, "I have it this way, and I'm not going to erase it." Slowly, he began to add what others were saying in the margins of his textbook, "to think that I was writing the ideas of others in *my* book gave me a lot to think about." Eventually, he was able to erase his answers and wrote in his fellow tutors' answers. He began to ask himself, "am I really changing? And I would look myself and realize that yes, I was changing."

This anecdote shows how individual change is a gradual process, and that it has implications in the way we interact with others. This is consistent with the idea that agency is temporal (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). For example, at the beginning the tutor was sure of his own answers, his own way of thinking, and had no desire to listen to the ideas of others. He felt that changing his answers would be betraying himself and his ideas, that it was somehow wrong to accept what others thought about his own convictions. Slowly he began to consider that others might be able to contribute to his knowledge and advancement. However, he struggled not to react negatively when others challenged his answers. Over time, he grew more comfortable with letting go of his own ideas. Ultimately, his ability to accept feedback from others had positive implications for his relationships with his fellow tutors, and this enriched his own learning and progress.

In this case and others, we found that an important element of "transformative agency" was first the cultivation of "new virtues and powers, new moralities, new capacities" (Farid-Arbab, 2016, 8). These descriptions of change at the level of the individual allow us to understand better how transformative agency requires first and foremost individual change, and next changes in collectives and the community.

Transformative Agency in PSA Communities

In addition to observing changes in their families, students also described changes in the community. Initially, the PSA group fosters a sense of belonging and connection. The student stops being an individual or a member of a particular family and becomes part of a larger group of friends with a shared purpose of working together for the well-being of their community. This is particularly important because prior to their participation in PSA, many of these youth were socially isolated.

Initially, the groups come together through the study of the books. For example, one student explained how much she enjoyed working as a group, because the emphasis of the program on collective learning results in a sense of collective consciousness. She remarked: "You could say we have constructed a shared way of seeing the world." The formation of this collective identity is a crucial first step in the process of engaging with the larger community.

As the PSA groups engaged with the community, this led to the creation of more spaces for the community to come together around shared

concerns, for example, in community meetings. At the beginning, few people attended, but slowly participation increased. Community members noticed that the PSA groups were actually making a difference, and this motivated more people to become involved. One student explained, "we had a lot of community meetings and a lot of people came. Some were about the environment, and the community participated, helping identify the problems and the solutions, and we all became aware of what we could do." The deep and sustained ways in which the PSA groups interact with the community may explain why, unlike the youth in Bajaj's study (2009), PSA youth did not describe a dampened sense of agency when they completed the program.

Finally, there was some indication that the community was being proactive in making small improvements, such as trash collection. Rather than asking "who will do it?" and "who will pay for it?" they came together to change the situation. Once the PSA group established a precedent of holding community meetings and engaging in projects, community members began to give their own ideas and responses to chronic problems such as the lack of proper trash disposal, fixing potholes, cleaning public spaces such as soccer fields, making benches for people to sit down, buying food for needy families and supporting the projects of elected leaders. A PSA student shared one clear example of this:

> It became evident when we got together with another PSA group in the community and organized a project for solid waste management. We invited all of the community, and presented our ideas for the project. We explained what the PSA program was about and the entire community understood the purpose of PSA and that it was there for everybody. The community felt empowered to participate and collaborate with this project. They all helped for the project to take place. Together we came up with strategies about how to reduce waste. We divided up into small teams in the community. We organized the streets. We cleaned them, and we were able to get enough trash cans. All of this we achieved with the help of the community.

While PSA has had an impact on the community, there was a recognition that the process has been slow and that there is much room for improvement. One mother's comments, (which inspired the title of this chapter), illustrate this: "Well, this program has really brought the community together. But we have more work to do. You know, everything

has a beginning and an end, and we are on our way, and we are on a good path." She further emphasized that "you have to keep insisting, you can't stop." She believed that education was the route for community change, but that this would not happen overnight.

It is also important to take into account that change can be dangerous. Change can be seen as a disruption of the way things are traditionally done, and some people are resistant to change, which could result in violence. One student explained this danger and resistance, "I would always ask my mother why would trouble arise if I didn't go looking for it? And she would explain that when one makes a change, that one acts in a way different from the rest of society, you are different, and people will oppose that." Despite these risks, the research participants were confident about the positive impact the program has had in their lives, their families and their communities.

The Development of Transformative Agency Through Acts of Service and Reflection

Students believed that participation in PSA gave them greater clarity and confidence to act in small ways to improve and change their communities. When looking at the ways in which the program achieved these results, we found that two key features of the program were consistently associated with agency. These included the explicit focus of the program on taking action, specifically in group-led service activities, and the purposeful integration of opportunities to reflect on their actions.

An Emphasis on Service

The PSA curriculum is designed with the central tenet that knowledge is inseparable from action. Service is the way in which action is oriented and systematically integrated into the student experience (see VanderDussen, 2009 for a more complete analysis of how service is conceptualized and integrated into PSA). This arrangement, which is an integral part of the curricular design, has an impact on the ways the students perceive their connection to others, how they begin to feel a sense of accomplishment, as they see concrete results of their actions and how these feelings impact their motivation to continue in the program, but more importantly, to continue interacting with their environment.

As one tutor mentioned, "the impact of the program really becomes apparent when students begin to engage in service. Because the community sees that these are disinterested acts of service, they are not for money or anything like that. And they see that youth can make a change."

One of the first environments where the students begin to develop the confidence to interact with their environment is their own PSA groups. They begin to reflect together about what they can do, and beginning to do small acts of service together helps them begin to notice that their actions can have an impact on their surroundings. The enthusiasm generated by the group begins to have an impact on the community and serves as an example of the different possible actions that can be undertaken. One tutor shared how even though the community was very much concerned with issues that they had identified they do not see the solution to these. When the students begin to take action, the "community sees that there were things that could have been done." That while there was previously a tendency to ask why the government or community leader was not taking action, now they see that "youth are taking action without any financial benefit and wonder if they could have done something themselves as well."

We identified a virtuous cycle sparked by these service activities in that the community benefited from the PSA students' service, and the students were enriched by their connection and interaction with other people in the community. One student shared how she saw her studies as a way of learning how to help others, particularly children. She expressed that "there should be more and more people who are worried about the betterment of the community. I hope one effect my training will have is that it will motivate others to become trained as well."

Small acts of service provide a sense of achievement and purpose, which further motivated students to stay engaged in their communities both while they were studying and after they had finished the program. These concrete service projects made students see the practical value of their studies. As one explained, "well, it motivates me because it is really helping us. For example, we are currently working on a project about how to prevent dengue. We are going door to door and talking to families, helping them to collect bottles, tires, and cans.[3] This is a program that will always take place in the context of the community."

It is through service that the participants began to develop a sense of satisfaction, a feeling that they have something to offer and this, in turn, motivates them to continue working to transform their environment. This motivation through service is expanded beyond the immediate

circle of their community to include a larger sphere of influence, or as one participant above explained, "humanity:" "when I talk about community, I am referring to my immediate context. But when I talk about humanity, I am also talking about all of the other places…" The ability to act for positive change is fostered in students and also in other members of the community. *In this way, agency is transformative because it extends beyond the individual and becomes a collective capacity to act.* Seeing agency in PSA youth inspired other community members to act in ways that would improve the community. Again, the deep embeddedness in the community may be the key reason why students' transformative agency extends beyond the time they are actively studying in PSA, because the school/community boundaries are nonexistent in PSA.

Service also enables students to view their community differently, with greater resources and potential. As one student explained:

> We became aware that the community has a lot of resources. Sometimes we expected that the resources would be used by outsiders, and we don't think they are important. Or we think that in our community there are no opportunities, and therefore I should leave [the community]. But we shouldn't leave. Because our community does have resources and we need to take full advantage of them.

The interaction between these elements, agency and resources (Kabeer, 1999), creates a reinforcing dynamic. The students' capacity to act increases as their sense of belonging to a group becomes solidified, and this in turn shows the community that they are able to take concrete actions that benefit them all. As a result, the students realize that their communities are not static entities but are rather dynamic and that they have their own resources. They do not need to leave their communities or wait for others to solve their problems. Acts of service strengthen their sense of agency and motivate them to act in ways that benefit the community.

An Emphasis on Systematic Reflection

The second element associated with increased student agency was the capacity to reflect. Our findings regarding the importance of reflection support the hypotheses of Archer (2012) and DeJaeghere et al. (2016) regarding the "core" role that reflexivity plays in agency development. Reflection is often stressed in participatory and empowering educational methodologies, but few educational spaces cultivate this habit through

its systematic integration into the curriculum, particularly in collective ways that focus on the community in addition to the individual.

Students explained that the capacity to reflect improved their confidence, as well as their desire and willingness to act. The habit of reflection was fostered through the PSA curriculum in textbook exercises, which are called "reflections." These exercises connect the concepts being studied in the lessons to other themes, introduce new ideas and/or ask the students to think of the application of a particular concept in a different context. These reflections are found in almost all lessons in the curriculum (e.g., of lessons from the curriculum that include reflections see Murphy-Graham, 2012). Examples of the reflections found in ten of the books can be found in the Appendix of this chapter. These exercises can be grouped into three categories:

- Reflections about the individual
- Reflections related to the interactions of individuals with the community and family and the nature of such interactions
- Reflections related to change and transformation.

These reflection exercises fostered the changed ways of thinking that students described as a result of their experience in PSA. As a first step, students reflect about themselves, about the role they play in their environment and their own abilities. Second, the reflection exercises allow the student to reflect about how he/she can interact with those around them and the characteristics of those interactions. Finally, the reflections allow the student to channel their ideas about the self and their interactions with others toward social change. Once this habit is cultivated in the classroom, students then used reflection in other contexts. PSA participants spoke specifically of how reflection influenced their thoughts and actions. For example, one PSA tutor explained that he had noticed his own change unfolding when he started questioning his actions. He explained how over time he had realized that:

> Asking questions of oneself also helps you change. How can I become a better person? How can I improve my relationship with my mother or father? Because at the beginning those questions are not relevant or important. I never used to think about those things, about how to improve my communication with them. But slowly I found myself thinking about these type of questions.

This capacity to reflect was recognized by the participants as a particular characteristic of the PSA program, and not something they had been taught to do before. In many cases, the students compared their experience with their formal schooling system and talked about the difference they saw when they compared both systems. One graduate of the program expressed how "in school one goes to learn mostly theoretical things. But here it is more about learning how to live with people that we see every day. It is about reflecting more."

In sum, the process of reflection allowed participants to further their awareness of their surroundings, and about possibilities for interaction and intervening in their communities. The insights gained through these reflections further motivated them to act, particularly in service activities that benefitted the community.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Our findings regarding how PSA supports the development of transformative agency for youth in Colombia highlight some of the advantages of non-formal education. As explained earlier, FUNDAEC developed the PSA program as an effort to ensure that certain elements of the SAT program (which is a formal and accredited high school program) were maintained and even strengthened. This was prompted because as national governments worked to improve educational quality, new curricular standards required SAT to respond to various forms of assessment, international standards and degree requisites. Because of this, many curricular elements in SAT were not adequately covered by tutors, particularly the service and reflection exercises (with more content to cover, these activities were skipped). What we found in our research illustrates an important paradox: The elements of SAT that were compromised in the name of improving educational quality are those that have a direct impact on the students' motivation to learn, their sense of agency and commitment to meaningful contributions to social change. Our findings suggest that one of the key elements of the PSA program is that students find motivation in action, in service and in the application of their learning. This motivation ensures that not only do they stay in the program but they do so out of their own volition, with no formal degree as validation of their effort. They participate because they love learning, and they are inspired by their newfound abilities to act in meaningful ways toward community betterment.

Another important insight gained by the study of PSA relates to the importance of relevant curriculum. In the case of PSA, the curriculum emphasizes that knowledge plays a central and fundamental role in the learning process of its participants. Concepts and information are presented in the textbooks in a particular integrated manner which is, of course, one way in which students acquire knowledge. Additionally, the PSA textbooks help students generate their own local knowledge through their interactions in the community: This includes knowledge about their environment, who the different actors are in their local environments, and about the diverse problems that affect their community. At the same time, they generate their own questions and begin to acquire the tools to answer these. Through the different practices, investigations and service components in the program, they generate their own knowledge about how to respond to pertinent issues. Their acquisition of "local" knowledge serves as a key resource for them to act in ways that can improve their communities.

In the case of FUNDAEC and its experience with SAT and subsequently with PSA, these findings are not limited to ideas about education, its purpose and its potential effects, but rather based on both formal and non-formal educational programs with established curriculums, structures and textbooks. In this regard, these models can be considered potential alternatives to learning in the Latin American context.

Notes

1. The Bahá'í Faith is the youngest of the world's independent religions. More information about it and its worldwide community is available at www.bahai.org. FUNDAEC is considered a "Bahá'í-inspired organization and SAT/PSA "Bahá'í-inspired programs. However, as Farid-Arbab (2016) clarifies, "the educational endeavors thus designated do not include religious instruction…. 'Inspiration' in this case refers to the framework of thought and action within which educational experience unfolds…Those involved in such programs are not exclusively Bahá'ís; they include a range of like-minded individuals who agree on the fundamental elements of the evolving conceptual framework" (p. 5).

2. The way in which FUNDAEC conceptualizes community development is also described at length in Farid-Arbab (2016). Community development is linked to its broader understanding of "civilization-building," FUNDAEC conceptualizes as a reciprocal relationship between personal

growth and organic change in the structure of society. A *telos* (an end or purpose) related to the purpose of education informed the theoretical approach of FUNDAEC; namely that education serves a twofold moral purpose of personal transformation—becoming "imbued with new virtues and powers, new moralities, new capacities" and of the transformation of society (Arbab-Farid, 2016, 8). The "aim of the educational process set in motion was thus expressed as the empowerment of the individual to assume responsibility for developing those virtues and powers required of her as a member of a human race now entering its age of maturity, on the one hand, and of consciously contributing to organic change in the structures of society, on the other" (Farid-Arbab, 2016, 8).

3. These are spaces where water accumulates and the female *aedes aegypti* mosquito lays eggs, so students worked to ensure breeding grounds were minimized.

Appendix: Units in the Curriculum and Their Reflections

Language

Properties
Reflections about the concept of change of state
Reflections about the concept of human will
Reflections about the concepts of cooperation, solidarity and unity

Systems and Processes
Reflections about positive and negative change
Reflections about possible changes in the state of a community
Reflections on the family as a system
Reflections about the interactions within a micro region
Reflections about the functioning of a system
Reflections about cooperation and competition within the context of search for excellence
Reflections about the concepts of structure and the functions of a system
Reflections about the interactions between subsystems
Reflections about the concept of cooperation
Reflections about interiorizing ideas
Reflections about the flow of information in a community

Mathematics

Classification
Reflections about sets and subsets: the human species
Reflections about the interactions among species: mutualism

Numerical Statements
Reflections about the concept of unity
Reflections about the concept of value

Technology

Planting Crops
Reflections about communities

Diversified High Efficiency Plots
Reflections about group work

Science

Heating and Cooling of Matter
Reflections about the concept of peer pressure
Reflections about the methods of science

Growth of a plant
Reflections about the life of the community
Reflections about the appropriate attitudes for the investigation of reality
Reflections about the concept of habits that are formed in our lives
Reflections about the concept of the structure of a system
Reflections about the concept of community
Reflections about the concept of interactions

Service

Environmental Issues
Reflections about the social dimension of transportation

Ecosystems
Reflections about group unity
Reflections about the interaction with a community
Reflections about the harmony between ecosystems
Reflections about taking decisions

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