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Respecting the Democratic Tradition of Oral Learning: An Ethnographic Study of Brazil's
Public Democratic School Amorim Lima

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Respecting the Democratic Tradition of Oral Learning: An Ethnographic Study of Brazil's Public Democratic School Amorim Lima (Alyssa Hartel)

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Democratic schools are learning institutions where students have a voice in the structure and organization of their learning. This school ethnography is a case study of a Brazilian public democratic elementary and middle school, Amorim Lima, in São Paulo. The purpose of the research was to understand the key elements of Amorim Lima's innovative educational project.

The theoretical framework for this research includes Paulo Freire's theory of emancipatory education involving a narrative relationship between students and teachers as well as oral tradition scholars Amadou Hampaté-Bâ and Daniel Murunduku's theories of learning in cultures of oral tradition. The study is also related to research in self-regulated learning and self-efficacy, self-directed learning and agency, and restorative justice in schools.

Data was collected for three months from participant observation at the school and short and long interviews with students, parents, and teachers. A central focus to the case study was the way members of the school community told their narratives. Participants recounted how student engagement and motivation have increased and how student conflict has decreased over the past 10 years as the school community has developed its democratic project.

The first unique educational element that emerged from the research was the *roteiro* system of learning in which students complete all of their learning at their own pace through journals, texts, and an online platform. Through the self-paced tasks that require them to engage with texts and organize their own learning, students exhibited agency, curiosity, and self-efficacy in their learning.

The second component of the school was the daily discussion circles called *rodas de conversa* in which students meet daily to freely discuss issues that impact them. The *rodas de conversa* are a way of solving conflict and building community in line with Freirian democratic education and the oral tradition.

The third essential element of the Amorim Lima project was a set of school-wide *community projects* including a garden, festivals, and drum and music circles. Through these projects, students learned to value their heritage and community and described increased motivation to attend school.

This case study shows that educational reform at the school level is possible within current public education systems and offers a uniquely Brazilian model for an inclusive, participatory school. The findings of this research may be useful for teachers and school leaders interested in innovative forms of learning, discipline, and community engagement in schools.

Keywords: democratic school, oral tradition learning, restorative justice, self-directed learning, school ethnography, Afro-Brazilian education, school transformation, case study

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1 Introduction

Ten years ago, Amorim Lima, a public elementary and middle school in São Paulo, Brazil was like most other public schools in the city, a concrete block with bars over the windows, plagued by violence, teacher absenteeism, and student apathy. Today, Amorim Lima is a public democratic elementary and middle school and a thriving, diverse cultural center for the working class São Paulo Butantã neighborhood. The school features community drum classes and concerts, a student-run vegetable garden, the only public school library in the city, and a unique system of student-run governance and self-directed teaching and learning.

The purpose of this research was to use Amorim Lima as a case study of a public democratic school. I wanted to better understand the intricacies of democratic education in practice with the ultimate goal of one day opening my own democratic school. My research method consisted of a three-month school ethnography at Amorim Lima where I gathered data through formal and informal interviews, observations, and participation in school-wide events.

Analysis of the data revealed three key components of the school that are most central to its unique democratic project: independent study journals called *roteiros*, daily discussion circles called *rodas de conversa*, and school-wide community festivals and projects honoring Brazilian traditions. The journals, discussion circles, and the communal projects have different pedagogical functions; however, they all give children the opportunity to actively connect with their learning and with each other.

The research questions I proposed were: What kind of theoretical perspectives describe the idea of a democratic school, specifically in this Brazilian context (chapter 2)? Furthermore, what makes Amorim Lima a democratic school, and how are students impacted by the democratic features of the school (chapters 4–5)?

This case study explores how an alternative education model is feasible even within a public urban education system and illustrates how high levels student of engagement and responsibility can be fostered through self-directed learning, democratic school governance, and celebrations honoring a multi-cultural heritage.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Democratic schools

Democratic schools are learning communities based on the idea that school should prepare students for participation in a democratic society. In truly democratic schools, all children are equal and free to make their own choices, explore their interests, and participate actively in the governance of the school. While there is great variation among democratic schools, they all offer students a degree of choice in the curriculum, freedom to organize their time and activities, voice in determining school-wide policies and decisions, and opportunities to create changes in their school community (Trafford 2008; Shutz 2001).

Examples of democratic schools can be found around the world. The longest running democratic school is The Summerhill School in England, which has been in existence since the 1920's (Neill 1960). Other democratic school experiments have included Leo Tolstoy's experimental school in 1860's in Russia (Cohen 1981), John Dewey's Laboratory School in the 1890's in Chicago (Schutz 2001), and several free and experimental schools in the 1960's and 1970's including the Escola da Ponte [Bridge School] in Portugal (Pacheco 2004; Barroso et al 2004), upon which the Amorim Lima school was based.

The Escola da Ponte in Portugal is a uniquely democratic school within the Portuguese public school system and the model upon which Amorim Lima based its democratic project. Launched in 1975 by José Pacheco, the Escola de Ponte school offers a different structure of learning and relationships than traditional Portuguese schools while still meeting the requirements for public funding and enrollment. Learning is organized in work spaces rather than classrooms, and students work on collaborative projects to acquire knowledge. A team of teachers, teacher aids, learning specialists, and school psychologists accompany the students and offer support and guidance. Students, families, and staff communicate their opinions about the school during democratic assemblies. Another key feature of the school is work shifts where students sign up for turns assisting with the maintenance of the school grounds and school projects. Through all of these democratically oriented features of the school, students learn to respect and express diverse opinions and participate actively in their learning (Alves 2000; Pacheco 2004).

2.2 Paulo Freire and democratic learning

2.2.1 Freirean criticism of the banking system of education

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's (1970) ideas constitute a theoretical framework by which to understand Amorim Lima because the school puts into practice many of his concepts of education for democracy including critical literacy, dialogue, autonomy, and critical consciousness. According to Freire, the purpose of education is to awaken a class consciousness among the masses and to encourage them to think critically about the structures of power and organize themselves for social change. He wanted to transform students from passive receivers of information, into active constructors of knowledge and of social change. In his most famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire described how education suffers from narration sickness in which the teacher narrates and the students listen, saying, "the [curricular] contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness (p. 71).

Freire described how this form of narrative education in which the students passively received static blocks of knowledge and learning void of real-world connections formed the basis of the "banking" model of education:

Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated account. Worse yet, it turns them into "containers," into "receptacles" to be "filled" by the teachers. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are.

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits... it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (Freire 1970, p. 71–72)

Instead of this *pedagogy of the oppressed* or banking model of education, disconnected from the real world, based on memorization of facts, with the teacher as narrator, Freire wanted a *pedagogy of liberation*, connected to the real world and based upon dialogue and critical thinking. He wanted to change the narrative relationship in education.

In *Education as a Practice of Liberty*, Freire (1983) described his desire to move away from a purely mechanical literacy education that had little connection to the real world. He criticized sentences in early literacy books lacking personal meaning, such as “Pedro saw the wing. The wing is from the bird.” Instead, he said, “we were thinking of a literacy for the Brazilian in a position of awakening consciousness of the process of our reality. In this work we would try to promote ingenuity in criticism at the same time that we alphabetized” (Freire 1983, p. 104). In addition to critical literacy, Freire emphasized the importance of dialogue in education, or a pedagogy of communication. Dialogue for Freire is:

a horizontal relationship education of A with B...It is fed by love, humanity, home faith, and trust. Because of this, only dialogue communicates. And when both poles of the dialogue link like this, with love, with hope, with faith in the other, they become critical in the search for something and they produce a relationship of empathy between both. Only here is communication. (Freire 1979, p. 68)

Freire stressed the importance of an education based on dialogue for democracy. He contrasted this with the tendency in Latin America towards an anti-dialogue, hierarchical, one-way style of learning in which students passively received formulas and communicated information imposed on them.

2.2.2 Criticism of Freire’s ideas of literacy as learning

One strong criticism of Freire comes from indigenous communities and researchers of indigenous ways of life who argue that his literacy-focused view of education is inherently derived from a western, industrial era way of thinking and lacking cultural sensitivity or appreciation of oral traditions. Bowers (2005) asserts:

the problem is that Freire and his interpreters did not recognize the Western assumptions implicit in his understanding of what it means to be human, to be emancipated from the knowledge of previous generations, and to exist in ways that do not take account of the fate of the environment. Nor did Freire and his followers understand the complexity of orally based cultures and the differences in their way of knowing and encoding knowledge of community-supportive relationships. Indeed, Freire once referred to orality as ‘regressive illiteracy’ and the oral cultures living in the interior of Brazil as the ‘backward regions of Brazil.’ Literacy for Freire and his followers was essential to becoming a critically reflective thinker and thus fully human. By ignoring a significant body of scholarly writings on the differences between orality and literacy, Freirean thinkers failed to understand that literacy itself is a colonizing process that reinforces a modern sense of individualism... (p. 2–3)

Freire's model of emancipatory education for democracy focuses on the individual student learning critical literacy, autonomy, class consciousness, and empowerment to organize and fight for material equality, rights, and freedom within western political and economic systems working against the non-written practices, beliefs, and education systems of the Afro-Brazilian and indigenous Brazilian people. Freire did crucial work to help low-income Brazilians learn to read, write, and understand math in order to question and challenge exploitation in Brazilian society, and I greatly admire him as an educator of reading and critical thinking. However, perhaps Freire's passion for emancipatory education through reading, critical thinking, and class consciousness led him to devalue the power in the knowledge, methods of learning, and collective socio-political organization of the indigenous and Afro-Brazilian cultures of oral tradition learning.

2.3 Daniel Murunduku and oral tradition learning in Brazil

I will next attempt to construct a theoretical framework for learning within cultures of oral tradition in order to better understand the history and rich cultural context of learning in Brazil beyond formal academic institutions. Oral tradition learning is related to informal learning, which Coombs and Ahmed (1973) describe as, "the lifelong process by which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment – at home, at work, at play" (p. 8). Informal learning is lifelong, holistic, experiential, and driven by the learner interacting with the world (Coffield 2000). In Brazil, oral tradition learning, or folk learning, shares aspects with informal learning in that both are holistic, experiential, lifelong, spontaneous, and part of social interaction in which knowledge passed from one person to the next. However, I believe distinguishes oral tradition learning from informal learning is that while both informal learning and oral tradition learning are spontaneous and unwritten, oral tradition learning also involves beliefs, practices, rituals, and traditions that are highly codified, formalized, and organized to encompass entire cultures' complex bodies of knowledge (Vansina 1985).

The oral tradition is both a process of passing down stories from one person to the next, and a product, those stories themselves. All cultures, both those with and without writing, contain elements of the oral tradition; however, in cultures without writing, the oral tradition takes on an even greater importance in daily life (Vansina 1985). Brazilian folklore scholars, Rossini

Tavares de Lima and Julieta de Andrade (1979) described oral tradition culture as folk culture or spontaneous culture as being deeply integrated into all aspects of life and:

a manifestation of humans feeling, thinking, acting, and reacting; spontaneous, created in a natural way that always accepts the collectivity and spontaneity, of the people...the learning of folk culture is neither direct instruction from the erudite culture, nor is it the consumption of popular mass culture, but is rather, transmitted from one member of the group to another, through social interaction, imitation, or unconsciously. (p. 6)

In Brazil, key elements of this folk culture are its spontaneity, collective nature, and transmission through social interaction. In order to better understand oral tradition as a framework for learning, I will compare two different oral tradition scholars' studies of their own cultures' systems of knowledge and learning. Daniel Murunduku (2012), a writer, educator, and member of the Murunduku indigenous Brazilian culture, and Amadou Hampâté Bâ (2010), a writer, historian, and member of the Fula people in Mali. These scholars do not necessarily reflect the cultures of students at Amorim Lima, but they give insight into the processes of teaching and learning in oral tradition cultures from the perspectives of two individuals who were raised in those societies. Murunduku and Hâmpaté-Bâ's explanation of knowledge and teaching in their respective cultures provide both examples of oral tradition knowledge and theoretical frameworks for understanding oral tradition learning.

Murunduku (2012a) explains how western education in Brazil was brought by colonizers to integrate them into society:

The integrationist paradigm was characterized by the idea that indigenous people, their cultures, their form of social organization, their beliefs, their ways of teaching and living were inferior to the European colonizers" and the purpose of the colonizers was "protect them, help them support themselves, teach them a job and integrate them. (p. 30)

However, indigenous societies already had their own way of teaching. Murunduku (2012a) cites indigenous leader Ailton Krenak, describing the traditional style of *learning through narratives*:

In our society, a child drinks the knowledge of his people in the practices of living together, in the songs, in the narratives. The songs narrate the creation of the world, its foundation and events. So, the child is growing here, learning the songs and hearing the narratives. When she grows a little more, when she is about six or eight years, then she is separated for a process of special learning, oriented in a process in which the elderly, the warriors, are going to initiate the child in the tradition. Then ceremonies occur which compose this formation and various rites which include gestures and external manifestations. The internal signals, the subjective signals,

they are precisely the essence of this collective. So, you end up sharing knowledge, the duty, and the dream of your people. (p. 47–48)

Thus, oral tradition learning involves songs, stories, rituals, and ceremonies that link the individual to the collective society. He describes how, “You can’t forget where you are from nor where you came from, because that’s how you know who you are and where you are going. This is important not only for the person as an individual, but also for the collective, it’s important for a human community to know who they are, to know where they are going” (Murunduku 2012a, p. 49–50).

For Murunduku, education is the process of forming in oneself a *memory of a collective history*. He describes, “Part of the knowledge developed by the indigenous nations throughout their historical trajectory is linked to transmission through oral narratives. In this way, each individual is forming in himself a memory in a process we know as education” (Munduruku 2012b, p. 67). Different from Freire who saw the necessity of literacy to awaken critical and class consciousness, Murunduku describes how continuing the oral tradition of learning and values is itself resisting the capitalism that is capable of selling their dignity and ancestry in exchange for comfort and illusory well-being:

This, relatives, is resisting. And this resistance continues alive until today...That resistance is maintained through a triple conception that, while ‘not a theory elaborated by the Occidental academy’ it is elaborated by the experience of life, by the meticulous observation of natural phenomena and by the certainty that we are ‘threads in the fabric’: education of body, mind, and spirit. (Murunduku 2012b, p. 68)

Thus, education for Murunduku’s people is an organized form of resistance to capitalism that holistically involves education of the body, education of the mind, and education of the spirit. Munduruku describes how the education of the body occurs as the child plays and works in the world. The child learns about how animals and plants grow and how to recognize them by sight and sound and footprints. The child learns how to prepare clothing, food, tools and work with others to sustain themselves physically. This is done through observation, participation, play, and instruction.

The education of the mind involves the recording and passing on of stories through the oral tradition. The educators are elderly people who are the library of knowledge of the people. Murunduku (2012b) describes:

through the act of hearing stories, told by the guardians of memory, our people educate their mind, the way in which the indigenous lives in his body, the mind elaborates through the silent and constant attention to the symbols that the stories bring us. The body which lives the present time nourishes itself, fills its emptiness through...memory. It is not, a life without meaning...on the contrary, it is a life full of meanings that reverberate through the body. Our people are, assiduous readers of the meaning of existence. Education for the comprehension of the world, as it was presented to us by the spiritual ancestors. Education to live this truth that, for our people, is a full life and shows us the path to wellbeing, happiness, freedom, and meaning. (p. 71)

Education of the mind involves connecting the education of the body to historical processes and knowledge of symbols and history.

The final component of education for Murunduku is education of the spirit. The education of the spirit is mediated via dreams that are connected to *rituals and spiritual knowledge*. Murunduku (2012b) describes:

Another aspect relevant to indigenous life is the dream. The dream is part of the belief that there are other possible worlds to be found. The dream is the language of the universe that we are relatives of all others who live with us on this planet. To learn the dream, we install in ourselves a kind of software that actualizes memories that turns us into belongers to a universal collectivity and makes us leave the prison that our body places on us. (p. 72)

Education of the spirit involves rituals and dreams that bring the child beyond knowledge of how to survive in the physical world and beyond the stories of his culture's history to a kind of pedagogy of freedom, different from Freire's, and linked to a spiritual awareness and universal collectivity. By closely understanding education in the oral tradition society of Murunduku's indigenous culture, it becomes clear that acquiring knowledge is complex emancipatory process of critical thinking that can occur outside of the formal classroom.

2.4 Amadou Hampaté-Bâ and oral tradition theory

My analysis shows that Murunduku's theory of oral tradition learning for his nation in Brazil is very similar to Malian oral tradition scholar Amadou Hampaté-Bâ's (2010) description of learning in the oral tradition in West Africa. Hampaté-Bâ describes folk learning in the oral tradition in Mali as a holistic experience involving language, stories, spirituality, proverbs, music, history, genealogy, artisanal crafts, rituals, entertainment, and social codes that are passed from one generation to the next:

Oral tradition is the great school of life, all aspects of which are covered and affected by it. It may seem chaos to those who do not penetrate its secret; it may baffle the Cartesian mind accus-

tomed to dividing everything up into clear-cut categories. In oral tradition, in fact, spiritual and material are not dissociated... Based on initiation and experience, oral tradition engages man in his total being. (p. 168)

This is very similar to Murunduku's description of oral tradition learning as both physical and spiritual. Both Murunduku and Hâmpaté-Bâ describe how narratives in the oral tradition are used to connect physical experiences in the present with stories of the past. Hâmpaté-Bâ (2010) describes:

Moreover, education is not systematic but is tied in with the circumstances of life. This manner of proceeding may seem chaotic, but in fact it is very practical and very live. The lesson given on the occasion of some special event or experience is deeply graven on a child's memory. If an old teacher comes upon an ant-hill during a walk in the bush, this gives him an opportunity for dispensing various kinds of knowledge according to the kind of listeners he has at hand. Either he will speak of the creature itself, the laws governing its life and the class of being it belongs to, or he will give children a lesson in morality by showing them how community life depends on solidarity and forgetfulness of self, or again he may go on to higher things if he feels that his audience can attain to them. Thus any incident in life, any trivial happening, can always be developed in many ways, can lead to telling a myth, a tale, a legend. (p.179)

Similar to Murunduku's (2012) description of how stories of history create a life full of meanings that "reverberate on the body," in the present, Hâmpaté-Bâ (2010) describes how storytelling in the oral tradition makes stories of the past felt and lived in the present. The oral tradition according to Hâmpaté-Bâ (2010):

is a matter not of remembering, but of *bringing up into the present* a past event in which everyone participates – the person who is reciting and his audience. The whole art of the storyteller lies in that. No one is a storyteller unless he can report a thing as it happened 'live' in such a way that his hearers, like himself, become new living, active, witnesses of it. (p. 199)

The value of the story in oral traditions is to make the past present and to connect listeners to that past.

Murunduku describes how his indigenous oral tradition's triple conception of *mind, body, and spirit* education was not the western idea of learning, but was elaborated through life experiences. Very similarly, Hâmpaté-Bâ (2010) describes the difference between western schooling and the lived experience of oral tradition learning saying, "[t]he whole difference between modern education and oral tradition lies there. What is learned at the western school, useful as it may be, is not always *lived*; whereas the inherited knowledge of oral tradition is embodied

in the entire being” (p. 184). This contrast between real life and the western school parallels Freire’s criticism of the “lifeless” banking style of education in the modern school.

Both Murunduku and Hâmpaté-Bâ describe the link between awareness of the physical world and awareness of the presence of history, as well as a third component, the spiritual or the sacred. For Murunduku, spiritual knowledge is learned through dreams and rituals. For Hâmpaté-Bâ, the sacred power of words are learned through initiation into a craft; “the instruments or tools of a craft give material form to the sacred words; the apprentice's contact with the craft obliges him to live the word with every gesture he makes” (2010, p. 184). Oral tradition learning for both Murunduku and Hâmpaté-Bâ is holistic, experiential, and based on collectively finding meaning in the physical reality through listening to, telling, and re-living stories, songs, and traditions that make both the past and the spiritual or sacred felt in the present.

To summarize, for both Murunduku and Hâmpaté-Bâ, the oral tradition is:

1. A system of knowledge and practices passed down through the generations including language, songs, stories, proverbs, plant and animal knowledge, cuisine, clothing, art, crafts, construction techniques, rituals, symbols, and ceremonies.
2. A method of teaching and learning based on observation, participation, and the sharing of stories about a collective history.
3. A worldview based on the presence of a collective social history and the spiritual or sacred power of words.

Interestingly, the distinctions Murunduku and Hâmpaté-Bâ make between western education and their cultures’ respective education systems very closely mirror Freire’s (1970) criticisms of the narrative relationship between teacher and student in Brazilian education:

The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to “fill” the students with the contents of his narration -- contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity. The outstanding characteristic of this narrative education, then, is the sonority of words, not their transforming power. (Freire 1970, p. 71–72)

Freire sought an education based on the transformative power of words connected to reality based on an active, participatory process of the learner with the teacher. While it might seem that Freire’s critical literacy is in opposition to oral tradition learning, both Freire and oral

tradition scholars view education narratively, rooted in experience with the world, organized via social processes, and based on the spiritual, sacred, or transformative power of words. I recognize that this comparison between two oral tradition scholars does not constitute a thorough theoretical framework for oral tradition learning, nor do the cultures of these writers directly reflect that of students in São Paulo. However, in gaining a better understanding of what education and learning look like in non-western cultures that emphasis orality, I was better able to understand how alternatives to the western “banking” method of education can be found in pre-colonial systems of knowledge and learning.

Self-regulated learning and self-efficacy

Next, I shall discuss some more recent western educational trends, self-directed and self-regulated learning, that are connected to both indigenous theories of learning in the oral tradition and Freire’s aspirations for an alternative to the banking model of education. Self-regulatory skills are the ability of students to monitor their learning processes and to modify their processes in order to master a skill. Self-regulation skills include planning one’s time, monitoring one’s own progress, and regulating one’s strategies in order to meet goals (Pintrich 1999). Zimmerman (1990) describes:

Perhaps most importantly, self-regulated learners are aware when they know a fact or possess a skill and when they do not. Unlike their passive classmates, self-regulated students proactively seek out information when needed and take the necessary steps to master it. When they encounter obstacles such as poor study conditions, confusing teachers, or abstruse textbooks, they find a way to succeed. Self-regulated learners view acquisition as a systematic and controllable process, and they accept greater responsibility for their achievement. (p. 4)

In a context of self-directed learning, students’ self-efficacy can be evaluated by assessing their ability to support their own learning, to organize their activities, to master learning strategies, to get help, and to motivate themselves (Heslin, Klehe, & Keating 2017).

Zimmerman (1990) describes how students who display initiative, intrinsic motivation, and personal responsibility achieve greater academic success. Zimmerman describes the process of self-regulated learning in which, “students monitor the effectiveness of their learning methods or strategies and react to this feedback in a variety of ways, ranging from covert changes in self-perception to overt changes in behavior such as altering the use of a learning strategy (p. 14). In addition, self-regulatory skills are important for lifelong learning beyond the formal, compulsory education system (Candy 1991). Pintrich (1990) researched the rela-

tionship of motivation and self-regulatory learning in traditional classrooms. However, he described how, “research is needed on how classroom practices can be changed to foster adaptive motivation and self-regulation (p. 469).

Pintrich (1990) also describes three motivational factors that positively influence students to regulate their own learning; “(a) self-efficacy beliefs (that is, judgments of one's capabilities to do the academic task), (b) task value beliefs (that is, beliefs about the importance of, interest in, and value of the task), and (c) goal orientations (that is, whether the focus is on mastery and learning of the task, grades or extrinsic reasons for doing the task, or relative ability in relation to social comparisons with other students)” (p. 462). Pintrich (1990) found that when students had mastery goals as opposed to extrinsic goals such as grades, they were more likely to use self-regulatory skills. Therefore, there is a relationship between use of self-regulatory learning skills and motivation based on mastery goals as opposed to extrinsic goals like the grades in traditional learning settings.

Chiu, Salili, & Hong (2001) highlight the potential of self-regulated learning as an important way of supporting diverse learning needs and learning styles. They discuss how in increasingly culturally heterogeneous learning environments as a result of globalization, “students coming from diverse cultural backgrounds may bring with them learning patterns conditioned by their cultural experiences” (Chiu et. al 2001, 8). Self-regulated learning can build a culture that supports diverse cultures and diverse learners by focusing on the growth of each individual student as opposed to competition between students. Chiu et al. (2001) use cross-cultural comparative studies of Chinese and Canadian students to show that, for students of both cultures, self-regulating learning strategies and mastery goals correlated positively with performance more than time spent studying.

2.5 Self-directed learning and agency

Self-directed learning is learning where the organization, design, and reflection or evaluation of the learning are initiated and managed by individual learner as opposed to an authority figure (Brookfield 2004). Normally considered part of adult education, children can also self-direct their learning when they get to decide what, when, and how to learn (Brookfield 2004).

Self-directed learning has been a central element to adult education theories and *lifelong learning* since Knowles' (1968) definition of *andragogy* and the characteristics of the adult learner who:

1. has an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning,
2. has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning,
3. has learning needs closely related to changing social roles.
4. is problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge,
5. is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors. (Merriam 2001, p.5)

Knowles later removed the “andragogy vs. pedagogy” perspective to his theory of learning and re-named it “learner-centered vs. teacher-centered” because he recognized that children also exhibited many of the characteristics that he originally used to define the adult learner. Adults could actually require more teacher direction if they knew little about a topic, and children could be naturally curious outside of school and able to self-direct their learning (Merriam 2001). Nevertheless, self-directed learning in practice has been less researched among young learners as compared to among adults.

Self-regulation is highlighted as a critical element of student learning, but self-directed learning theories suggest that self-regulation in practice is usually too narrowly restricted to the teacher-centered model of teaching in which the students' agency is still limited. Agency is the capability of people to make choices and to act on those choices as they do self-directed learning (Martin 2004). Martin (2004) calls for less teacher-centered learning and more student-driven learning in self-regulatory classrooms because the majority of self-regulatory classrooms still do not offer students the opportunity to make enough choices on how to direct their learning process.

2.6 Restorative justice in schools

While Amorim Lima does not specifically use “restorative justice” as a label for their daily conversation circles, these circles are in line with international trends of using group mediation and talking circles in place of discipline and punishment. Schools around the world from Brazil to the US to the UK use talking circles as restorative practices to mitigate behavioral problems and confront bullying (McCluskey et al 2008; Grossi 2012; Tacker 2011; Costello Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010).

Zehr (1990) defined and mainstreamed the use of restorative justice in the criminal system in 1990 based on the restorative practices of Mennonites and American and Australian indigenous peoples. Zehr (1990) believed that offenders and victims of crimes needed to meet together to repair the damage that was done to communities during a crime. Restorative justice has spread beyond the criminal justice system to educational systems in an effort to build community through dialogue and discussion.

Restorative justice is a process in which the people directly involved in a conflict determine together how to repair the harm that was done (Weitekamp & Kerner 2011, p. 110). McCold and Wachtel (2011) described, “[d]efining restorative justice as a process to address and repair the injuries by a given crime includes a supposition that restorative outcomes have a transformative dimension: transforming victims into survivors, conflict into cooperation, shame into pride, and individuals into community” (Weitekamp & Kerner 2011, p. 117).

While restorative justice can take many different forms, it is always based on an idea of mediation through language. Manozzi (2011) describes how mediation permits the redefining of the relationship between different subjects through language. Mediation is a form of knowledge as well as a relational process based on open communication. This communication must occur “within a framework of rules that on the one hand allow communicative multifunctionality, while on the other impeding anarchic application” (Manozzi, cited in Weitekamp & Kerner 2011, p. 234). Restorative justice ideas of mediation and problem-solving through open dialogues where all members are seen as equals is central to the idea of democratic education as it is practiced at Amorim Lima.

3 Methodological choices

3.1 Case study

This research falls under the category of case study which seeks to understand the specific interacting factors and outcomes of a single phenomena. While the case could range from a program, to an institution, to a policy, the focus is on the in-depth study of a singularity within a specific sociopolitical context (Simons 2014). The emphasis in case study research is on deeply understanding a particular situation by understanding the complexities of its social and historical context and interconnected individuals and events (Simons 2014; Bassey 1999; Tight 2014).

Bassey (1999) describes three types of case-study research in education: 1. Theory-seeking and theory-testing case studies; 2. Story-telling and picture-drawing case studies; and 3. Evaluative case studies. This research falls under the category of story-telling and picture drawing (portrayal) case studies which are “narrative stories and descriptive accounts of educational events, projects, programmes, institutions or systems which deserve to be told to interested audiences, after careful analysis” (Bassey 1999, p. 58). The difference between story-telling and picture-drawing case studies are that “story-telling is predominantly a narrative account of the exploration and analysis of the case, with a strong sense of a time line. Picture-drawing is predominantly a descriptive account, drawing together the results of the exploration and analysis of the case” (Bassey 1999, p. 61). This study falls more under the category of picture-drawing/portrayal case studies because most of the focus is on the school as it exists today rather than its history, although much of the data depicts a timeline of the school as well.

Case study is neither a research method nor a theoretical framework and can incorporate many types of research methods including interviews, observations, and document analysis and can be framed by many different theoretical lenses. What distinguishes case study research from other types of qualitative research is the focus on the deeply contextualized singular case (Simons 2014; Bassey 1999; MacDonald & Waler 1975; Tight 2017). Case study research is useful at the educational policy and practice level because it allows for rich information about concepts and processes to emerge that can be relevant to other cases in different contexts. In addition to being able to discover knowledge that could be applied to other simi-

lar situations, the study of the particular case is valuable in itself, not only because of its generalizability, but because of the deep and unique understanding it provides (Simons 2014).

A case study is an important form of social science research, especially, when it gives insight into a rare process or event that has no clear counterparts for comparison (March, Sproull, & Tamuz 1991; Adams, Clemens, & Orloff 2005, cited in Schrank 2006). In presenting the case, it is important for the researcher to remain unbiased and ensure that the presentation of the case does not present the researcher's praise or blame (MacDonald & Walker 1975).

This research uses the school, Amorim Lima, as a case study of a democratic school and examines how the São Paulo historical and societal forces influence Amorim Lima's particular version of democratic education. The specific case of Amorim Lima is relevant not only to similar public schools in Brazil, but also to educators, school leaders, and researchers in other situations interested in different elements of the Amorim Lima case including *school transformation, alternate styles of learning, restorative justice circles, and school-wide projects*.

3.2 School ethnography

This research was a 3-month school ethnography employing participant-observation as the method for collecting field notes as well as semi-structured interviews. The research questions I asked were: What makes Amorim Lima a democratic school? How are students impacted by the democratic features of the school?

Ethnography involves an outside researcher entering a culture that is different from her own, and observing and participating with the group of people, collecting field notes, and writing an account of the experience in attempts to answer a broad research question about the practices, customs, or relationships of the group (Wolcott 1999; Erickson 1984). School ethnographies are prevalent in both the fields of Anthropology of Education and Sociology of Education and usually focus on teachers and students, although there have been studies on school secretaries, school counselors, and other members of school communities (Delamont 2013).

The purpose of the ethnography is to provide readers with a rich experience of the social unit as the ethnographer lived it in order to convey both an insider and outsider perspective of the social unit of the culture. The school, the classroom, a club, or the cafeteria is a social unit, embedded in cultures, and with a very clear sub-culture of its own with its own social relationships, customs, rituals, and practices (Erickson 1984). In all ethnographies, and very much

so in school ethnography, the researcher becomes a part of the social unit being studied, the classroom, the school office, the playground, or the school itself and builds relationships with the members of the group in a way that provides an intimate insider/outsider look at the relationship dynamics of that unit (Wang 2013; Gilmore & Glatthorn 1982; Werner & Rothe 1979).

School ethnographic data collection activities include observation of interactions and language, participation in activities, document analysis, and interviews. In structured interviews, the ethnographer has a series of pre-set questions to ask the informant, while in semi-structured interviews, the interview takes shape as it progresses (Wolcott 1999). The data is compiled in the form of field notes, which are coded, analyzed, and interpreted by the ethnographer throughout the study and synthesized narratively to present readers with an account that conveys the richness of the experience as well as the generalized themes and trends (Delamont 2013; Werner & Rothe 1979).

The first school ethnographies of the 1960's established seven common themes that continue to be explored in school ethnographies today (Delamont 2013). These themes include:

1. How schools can *create* scholastic and disciplinary difficulties and accentuate the problems they face (difficulties and problems they cannot subsequently solve) by their organisation and procedures without realising what they are doing.
2. How there can be irreconcilable culture clashes between ethnic or cultural or linguistic minorities and the mainstream government (or missionary) school system, and how such culture clashes can also arise across social classes.
3. How hard the everyday life of the classroom teacher is.
4. How classrooms are places where 'busyness' is valued.
5. How teachers make 1000 decisions every day.
6. How precarious the teacher's control regime is, even in the best run classrooms in the most elite schools.
7. How resistant to change the dominant systems of talk, of teaching, and of control over knowledge are. (p. 4)

In order to continue innovating as a research method, Delamont (2013) suggests that educational ethnography find new ways of studying schools and classrooms; "[t]he vast majority of educational ethnographies focus on pupils between the ages of 6 and 18 in state schools...Educational ethnography would be far better if the research on the unusual, excep-

tional settings were systematically drawn upon to provide contrasts that force the researchers in the ‘normal’ school to think about it in novel ways” (Delamont 2013, p. 20). The school ethnography of this study draws upon an unusual and exceptional education setting as Amorim Lima is – to my knowledge – the only public democratic school in Brazil.

3.3 Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research that looks at stories of experience as the basis for data collection and analysis. The researcher enters into the lived experiences of participants and seeks to understand the story of their experience from their perspectives. Clarindinin & Huber (in press) discuss how, “narrative inquiry is a process of entering into lives in the midst of each participant’s and each inquirer’s life...Narrative inquiry always begins in the midst of ongoing experiences.” The purpose of narrative inquiry is to better understand some aspect of society by momentarily suspending our own view of reality as we step into someone else’s story, with the possibility of emerging from the story with a different, transformed, view of the world, and ultimately, sharing that new understanding with others.

Riessman (2008) emphasizes the role of the narrator’s experience and perspective in narrative methodology whereby storytelling, “engages an audience in the experience of the narrator. Narratives invite us as listeners, readers, and viewers to enter the perspective of the narrator” (p. 9). There is a focus on engagement and invitation of the listener to understand the perspective and experience of the narrator.

In my understanding, ontologically, narrative methodology approaches reality as individually objective and collectively subjective. That is, the individual narrator’s experience of reality is valued as objective truth during the narration process, while the resulting meta-narrative reflects a subjective reality. Epistemologically, narrative methodology values experience as knowledge; experiencing is knowing. The listener attempts to experience (or at least imagine herself experiencing) the world as the narrator experiences it in order to gain new knowledge and a new way of knowing.

Narrative inquiry involves not only collecting stories, but also analyzing them narratively. Polkinghorne (1995) describes two types of data analysis in narrative inquiry, the *paradigmatic* type and *narrative* type:

The paradigmatic type collects storied accounts for its data; the narrative type collects descriptions of events, happenings, and actions. The paradigmatic type uses an illicit process that identifies aspects of the data as instances of categories; the narrative type uses an analytic process that produces storied accounts. The paradigmatic type is based on what Bruner has termed paradigmatic reasoning; the narrative type is based in narrative reasoning. Narrative inquiry of the paradigmatic type produces knowledge of concepts; the narrative type produces knowledge of particular situations. (p. 21)

We could also say that researchers using the paradigmatic type of narrative inquiry attempt to analyze elements of stories to create knowledge of concepts and categories that could be applied to other situations. Researchers using narrative type of narrative inquiry seek to craft stories that reflect a particular place and series of events.

My research analysis is both paradigmatic and narrative. *Paradigmatically*, this study isolates three important components of democratic education at Amorim Lima, the portfolio, the discussion circles, and the community projects. *Narratively*, the analysis communicates these elements through stories that reflect my interpretation of community members' experiences.

3.4 Narrative of research process

3.4.1 How I found and became a part of Amorim Lima

I first learned about Amorim Lima several months before going to Brazil when I was studying democratic education during a Sociology of Education course at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. I looked for democratic schools in São Paulo, found Amorim Lima and wrote the school an e-mail. They never wrote back. When I arrived in São Paulo during the Carnival festivals, I wrote another e-mail to the school and called them on the phone in shaky Portuguese. The secretary told me to write an e-mail, which I did again, but I never heard back from them. I gave up on my interest in visiting them and delved into a life of capoeira, forró dance classes, festivals, and exploring the urban jungle of São Paulo.

One night, I was in a Brazilian forró dance class and started chatting with one of the dance teachers, Giovana. I told her I studied education, and she told me that she was doing an internship in science education at a really progressive school called Amorim Lima. She said I could text her if I ever wanted to visit the school. Later on in the evening, another dance teacher made an announcement about the importance of creating a community from the ground up and told a story of how a nearby school had such a strong community that they

were able to clean and refurbish a run-down plaza in a low-income neighborhood without any support from the government. The school was Amroin Lima.

Even later on that same night, I went to a circus workshop near my house and started talking with a juggler and mother of a 5-year old as we watched the fire breathers and gymnasts. When I mentioned that I was studying education, she complained about how terrible the public education system was in São Paulo except for one school with a different style of teaching where she would consider sending her daughter. Again, the school mentioned was Amorim Lima. Before that evening, I had completely dropped my interest in visiting Amorim Lima, but after suddenly hearing about the school three times in one evening, I decided to text Giovana and visit the school.

We met at the gate outside of the school walls at 7am. Giovana arranged for a 5th grader to give us a tour and explain the way the school works. The child, Irene, explained how this school was different than other schools because students are free to move about the building and participate in workshops and classes as they wanted, but there were no set rules or consequences determining what they had to do. Irene showed us how the students don't attend normal classes, but instead are given portfolios called *roteiros* with all of the units that they can complete at their own pace. She told us how every day, each age group of students has a 30–60 minute circle discussion called a *Roda de Conversa* (conversation circle), where they discuss school, community, national, and international issues. Irene told us about the work turns where students sign up to clean the patio or work in the garden, and she showed us the garden where students grow vegetables, fruits, and flowers together. We visited the library, the only public school library in Brazil, and Irene introduced me to the school librarian who explained how a group of parent volunteers came together to create the library.

The school librarian introduced me to some of the “librarian mothers,” who invited me to help out with the arts and crafts fair. At the arts and crafts fair, I met more parents who began inviting me to come back and visit other school-wide events and help out in the library more. People were so open and friendly, and I started meeting children and teachers who kept inviting me to come back and visit, so without a specific research project, I was at the school several times a week.

3.4.2 Becoming involved with Amorim Lima

I began considering changing my research topic to study the creation of the library at Amorim Lima, but I was scared to ask for official permission to conduct research at the school outside of the library because, after all of my difficulties getting in contact with the school, I didn't want them to say no and then tell me to stop coming.

One day, a friend with lots of face piercings accompanied me to the school when I was visiting for a chat with the librarian. He was dressed in beach clothes, and the principal, Ana Siqueira, who had always overlooked me, saw my friend and suddenly stopped us and said, "Who are you and what are you doing here?" She said we had to leave until we had an appointment. I told her that I had permission from the librarian to conduct research on the school library, and she said, "You need to get permission from me! The librarian can't give you permission!" She told me to come the next day very early to do an interview with her.

I showed up very early, and she arrived to school very late. We had to reschedule the interview at least ten times because there were always other more pressing matters, and in the process, Ana became friendly to me and gave me permission to conduct research. She told me that my research project was a good idea, but that instead of researching just the library, I should study the whole school. She said I was welcome to observe whenever I wanted, and although she kept cancelling our interview, she encouraged me to participate in a variety of events at the school. I spent hours almost every day waiting around the front office of the school for her to be free for our interview, and this time provided many opportunities to interact with children, teachers, and parents and to hear their stories.

I told school community members that I was a graduate exchange student at the university and interested in the democratic project at the school because I loved the Amorim Lima project and wanted to open a democratic school in the future in the USA. I always asked for permission to use their stories in my research, and everyone always said yes. People were eager to share the school with me and give me advice on how to continue my research. They would say, "come to the festival on Friday," "go and talk with the school volunteer librarian," "you should schedule an interview with the principal," "come help out at the fair on Saturday," "you are welcome to join the drum group on Thursday," "do you want me to show you the garden?" "have you seen the middle school work room?" "did anyone show you the roteiros yet?" "let me give you my phone number to talk more."

When I told children about how I wanted to open a school, they began telling me about their experiences with the school, saying, “this school is different from other schools” (5th grader), “that’s good that you want to open a different kind of school. I used to go to a traditional school and I hated it” (6th grader), and “this school has lots of culture! We have a big cultural festival coming up” (first grader), “this school is based on autonomy and independence. You have to be responsible” (9th grader).

I was impressed with the curiosity that the children had in my project. A 4th grader asked, “do you want your democratic school to be public or private? I think public is better because then everyone can participate and not just rich people.” A wide-eyed first grader exclaimed, “you want to open a school like this one?! You’re going to need lots of money! You’ll need to buy a bathroom, and a big staircase, and lots of games and lots and lots of books.” A 5th grader wearing cat ears came up to me in the dismissal area and said, “I heard you want to open a school in the US someday...well I think you should have classes that students get to choose like photography or home economics because that would be really interesting, and most people don’t know how to manage a budget to run a home.”

Parents also began sharing information without me asking any questions. A father at the snack table during the arts and crafts making party heard that I was from the University of São Paulo. He began the conversation, and said, “are you from the USP? This school has a very high proportion of students with disabilities and special needs and USP students always help them out. All public schools in Brazil are supposed to accommodate these children, but most do not. This school is part of a special inclusion project. My son has autism and worked last year with a student from the university. I work in construction, and since the school has a small budget for building maintenance, I volunteer here on the weekends.” A mother, who was in charge of the committee at the library, began chatting with me and telling me about the school; “this school relies a great deal on the participation of the parents. The parents are always here doing new projects and raising money for the school. The democratic project of the schools started actually as a result of a bunch of mothers coming together and wanting a change.”

Teachers were less available for interviews because they were busy teaching and helping students; however, I was able to conduct a lengthy informal interview with the music teacher when I ran into him on the bus and we sat in São Paulo rush hour traffic one morning on the way to school. He told me that the principal, Ana Siqueira, was the driving force behind

the transformation of Amorim Lima, and that her greatest strength was being able to bring parents, government workers, volunteers, and teachers together.

I recognize that being from the United States helped me start conversations with lots of parents and children because the culture of the US has such a presence in Brazil. A father who was helping in physical education told his son, “she’s American. Make friends with her,” and he gave me their number and e-mail. A mother also gave me her e-mail and introduced her children to me and told them to practice their English with me. She said that we should keep in contact because they are planning on visiting the US someday.

Similarly, most children were very enthusiastic to meet me, because the majority of the international researchers and volunteers are from Latin America and Europe. They said, “Wow! You’re American!” (many students) “We have a new American teacher!” (first grader) “We have a British teacher!” (confused 3rd grader) “Oh, hello again. It’s my lovely American teacher!” (4th grader) “Did you meet the American teacher?” (many students).

Children were also eager to ask me about the US, “Do you know the Kardashians?” (4th grader), “What does zootopia mean in Portuguese?” (3rd grader), “What does Angry Birds mean in Portuguese? (3rd grader), “Do you have a dollar?” (1st grader), “What is the biggest problem in the US?” (5th grader). They were also curious to know of my opinion on Brazil, “What did you know about Brazil before you came here? (6th grader), “What do you like most about Brazil?” (5th grader), “What’s your favorite food in Brazil?” (4th grader).

It was very easy for me to find people to tell me stories and to observe people conversing and sharing stories with each other because of the free-flowing movement of children and parents in the school. Children were constantly coming in and out of the library, where I started off each day, and, because of their self-created schedules, they had a great deal of free time to converse, show me around the school, and introduce me to their friends and parents. I spent most of my days waiting for an interview with the principal that kept getting re-scheduled and hearing and participating in conversations with children and parents about the school.

One of the longest interviews was with an alumnus who had graduated from the 9th grade last year and was now studying at one of the top public high schools in the city. He continued visiting Amorim Lima and helping out at the school library and was able to reflect on how his education at Amorim Lima was connected to larger social and political movements in Brazil. He said, “Amorim Lima teaches you to think differently and to make a change if you don’t

like something.” These organizing skills helped him participate in the organization of city-wide student protest and strikes against education funding cuts. The principal, Siqueira, told him that he had to go to the university to study education and one day become the principal of Amorim Lima when she retires. He said, “I would love to become the director of Amorim Lima. It’s a very good school. I could also imagine a school with even more freedom.”

3.4.3 Data based on notes of conversations and observations

When I looked through my notes at the end, I found that I had collected many short interviews as well as nine long narratives (30–60 minutes) from:

1. a university student and intern at the school
2. a mother who worked in the library
3. a father who volunteered at the school
4. the school librarian
5. the music teacher
6. a 4th grade student
7. a group of three 6th grade students
8. a former student who was now in a high school
9. the principal

It is important to state that these long narratives did not come from a formal interview process, but rather began as simple conversations about the school that grew into longer stories and deeper conversations. Sometimes I asked questions like “Why?” “What do you mean?” “What was that?” “What does that word mean?” however, my main response was “Wow!” (nossa!) “Really?” (Verdade?) “Oh my goodness!” (Meu deus!) “Cool!” (Qué legal!) “Great!” (Ta/ta bom) “I understand” (Entendi) and the Brazilian Portuguese sounds that show active listening: “mmm,” agreement: “eeh,” and disapproval “tss” and “tcha.” I wrote down everything I heard in my journal.

I had many other shorter interviews (15–20 minutes long) with children while chatting and playing with them, and they usually said everything they wanted to say and ran off to play or finish a project after about 15 minutes. Unlike the adults who tended to ramble on and on and tell lots of details, the children were very spontaneous and expressed their opinions honestly

and with many examples very quickly. I walked into the library, and a student called me over to say,

You're researching this school? I like this school, you know why? Because in normal schools they don't let you do anything. If I want to call my mom here, I just go into the office and they let me use the phone. At other schools, they'll be like, (in a mocking tone) 'you can't be in the office! The office is for adults! Why do you need to call your mom? Don't make a habit out of it.' At this school they just trust you. It's way better. (5th grader)

Another child joined in with:

Yeah, and here they don't yell at you to make you do your work. Like if you don't want to do it that day, they won't make you. If you never want to do it, they'll try to talk to you and figure out why you don't want to do it. They'll help you and make you want to do it. Eventually everyone does their work because they want to go to the next grade. Everyone works, but you're never forced to. (Another 5th grader)

A student from a nearby table overheard and chimed in saying:

Yeah and they don't make you sit in your desk and copy from the board. If you want to work with your friends you can, or if you want to work at home you can. You can bring your papers to the library or to the garden or the patio to work. (4th grader)

The conversation would end when they wanted to get back to work, and I would ask for permission to include their comments in my thesis. They always said yes, and I would find another group to talk with.

In addition to talking with members of the school community in order to get direct narratives from them, I also observed and listened to the creative and spontaneous ways children and teachers told stories to each other. In many schools and communities, the basis for social interaction and identity construction can be viewed through the lens of the stories people tell and live (Bell 2003; Polkinghorne 1995). By exchanging, telling, reading, writing, listening to, and experiencing stories, students connected to each other, their academic materials, and their traditions and culture.

Because I am not fluent in Portuguese, understanding the stories that people shared with each other was more difficult than understanding the stories the stories they shared with me. People, especially children, were very patient with me and spoke slowly and clearly when they told me stories. However, when they spoke with one another, they spoke quickly, with a lot of slang, several people speaking at once, and about people, events, and projects I didn't know

about. I did my best to write down everything I could and to take note of the context, storytelling style, slang, phrases, and reactions of students. Eventually, as I spent more time at the school, I got to know the students, became familiar with the context, and was able to understand more. Also, the fact that I was actively listening to, recording, and participating in daily conversations helped my conversational Portuguese greatly improve.

3.4.4 Interviewing the principal and leaving Amorim Lima

The university went on strike during my last month in Brazil in protest of government funding cuts for public education and increasing privatization of education, so all of my classes at the University of São Paulo were cancelled. I spent my new free time observing at Amorim Lima and waiting for my interview with the principal, Ana. She would say, “I’m so sorry, my dear! There was so much traffic! Can we do tomorrow?” Tomorrow would come, and she would say, “Excuse me, we had a last-minute meeting with parents. Let’s try tomorrow,” “My goodness, today is crazy. It won’t work. We are waiting for a concrete delivery for the patio. What time are you free tomorrow?” On my last full day in Brazil, I waited the whole day for an interview and said goodbye to the students and parents. Ana had forgotten that it was my last day, and I couldn’t stay late because I had a goodbye party with my *fórró* class at the university. I told her that I was leaving tomorrow and wouldn’t be able to come to the school anymore. She asked, “what time is your flight?” I told her that it was in the afternoon. She said, “Come tomorrow first thing in the morning! I really want to give you this interview.” I didn’t believe her, but I went anyway. She wasn’t there at 7:30 when I arrived, and I thought she wasn’t going to show up, but then she did.

We drank coffee and talked in her office for over an hour about how she and the community of parents transformed Amorim Lima into a participatory democratic school based on inclusion, community involvement, and political engagement. She told me how they went to Portugal to learn about the public, democratic *Escola da Ponte*, and how they had to make gradual changes in order to receive approval from the government. As I sat in São Paulo traffic on the way to the airport, I realized how lucky I was to have spent several months at such an amazingly unique school.

4 Analysis and findings

From student and family narratives about Amorim Lima, three essential elements to the organization of learning emerged – the learning portfolio, the conversation circles, and school-wide traditions and events. Each of these elements is central to the democratic project of the school and to the narrative construction children have with their learning. The following presentation is based on my data, collected from multiple sources introduced in the previous chapter.

4.1 The Roteiro – the learning portfolio

The roteiro, or learning portfolio, is the way that learning is organized at Amorim Lima. Instead of attending normal classes, students are given a series of independent assignments in a folder that go along with their textbooks. All of the folders must be completed by the end of the year if students want to advance to the next grade's set of portfolios. These assignments require close reading of books that cover a variety of subjects and units from geometry to sociology to Portuguese. The students answer questions that show they have closely read and thought about the material. They complete these assignments at their own pace and highlight them when they are completed and check them off in the online platform. The teachers are available to help, and when they see in the online platform that the assignments are completed, they read them and give comments. Finally, the student writes a reflection of what they thought of the roteiro, what they liked and didn't like, what they learned, and if they thought the feedback was fair.

The portfolio style of learning begins in 2nd grade after students have spent 1st grade learning how to read independently. Students study units in math, geography, sociology, history, life sciences, and Portuguese with portfolio titles ranging from order of operations to consumerism to marine biology. I examined two roteiros, 5th grade order of operations, and 9th grade WW1, from the Amorim Lima website and found that the material is presented to students as an engaging story with which they interact (Amorim Lima website, February 22, 2018).

4.1.1 Examples of the roteiro tasks

The 5th grade math book is full of pictures and word problems with a series of characters who interact and tell stories. The characters describe their personalities at the beginning of the book and appear throughout the story. There are also mysteries and puzzles at the beginning of each chapter that can only be solved using the information from the chapter. The book begins with the history of numbers and math and shows children different ways that cultures have depicted the number 5 from knots in a rope to Roman numerals. For the portfolio, students engage with the math to solve real-world problems, investigate careers that use numbers, display information about Brazil using numbers, construct an abacus, explain how to solve problems using an abacus to a friend, write their own word problems, and write a personal reflection of how people might use percentages and order of operations in their jobs. By portraying math problems as stories that characters face and inviting children to solve these stories, the math books and portfolios engage the students and help them construct their knowledge of math narratively and in relation to their own imaginations and their own lives.

Similarly, the history textbooks and portfolios require students to carefully read history as a story and to create their own knowledge about that story by analyzing and synthesizing information, writing personal reactions, and reflecting on their own lives. The WWI roteiro for 9th grade asks students questions such as, “Explain how the imperialist dominance of Africa can be seen as an unfolding of the second industrial revolution” or “Give an example of the reaction to imperialism in Africa and write a text characterizing the movement.” The textbook provides students with a variety of primary and secondary sources regarding the era as well as complicated charts, maps, and images. The portfolio also asks students to compare the historical events to their own lives with questions such as, “Throughout the unit, you have been studying how the imposition of cultural elements from one culture to another is a characteristic of imperialism. Do you experience influences of outside cultures in your daily life? Explain.” Students critically examine their own lives and analyze how the influences they experience from other cultures are similar to or different from the European imperialism in Africa and Asia. There is no correct answer to this question, but rather an invitation to relate to history and to compare their experiences in Brazil to other countries. By providing students with texts that they need to closely read, analyze, and connect to their own lives, Amorim Lima gives students the opportunity to actively create their own personal understandings and relationships with world history.

4.1.2 Roteiro learning process

Students finish a portfolio at least every two weeks and write a personal reflection at the end of the portfolio about what they learned, which activities were most challenging or interesting, what they would change about the roteiro etc. Students who used to attend traditional Brazilian schools said that the portfolio helped them remember the material better because of the reflection they wrote after each portfolio. Many students who used to attend traditional schools and switched to Amorim Lima were able to contrast the portfolio style of learning to their old school's way of learning:

Student 1: In my old school, it was just read, memorize quickly for the test and then forget.

Another student: In mine also. Memorize, memorize, memorize quickly and later you didn't remember anything.

Student 1: Everyone used to cheat.

Me: Like copy your friends on a test?

Student 1: Not copy, but have a paper with all the answers on it. I only cheated once, and it was an accident because someone passed me the paper.

Another student: Here it's more welcoming. The portfolio is more enjoyable.

Student 2: Here you don't forget because after the portfolio, you do a reflection where you write what you learned in the roteiro, what you liked, what you didn't like, if you think the teacher corrected your work well.

These students described how the process of deep reading, answering questions, and writing a narrative of what they learned instead of reading, memorizing, and taking a test helped them better remember the material by helping them establish a personal connection to the material. This process, combined with the fact that they get to write about whether they think the teacher corrected them well exemplifies the dialogue relationship that Freire called for in which communication between students and teachers was based on a two-way dialogue.

Similarly, a student described how the reading and learning process of the portfolio required more work and taught her more. She said, "this school is different because we have portfolios and you work at your own pace. In my old school, I didn't learn much, but now I have to work harder. Now, I am even learning English on my own with an app on my cellphone." The roteiro requires students to work harder and play an active role in constructing knowledge and pushes them to take responsibility for their learning as self-directed learning theories suggest.

While it may seem that self-paced learning is very isolating and does not provide students with enough opportunities to socially interact, in actuality it is a very organically social process. All students are covering the same material at different paces, so students see what their friends are working on and engage in discussions about the material. One boy saw his friends with their books open to an illustration of a bean. He enthusiastically recalled that section and began trying to tell the story of the bean to his friends, saying, “Hey, that on the bean...is that gonna become the leaf later on? Yeah, that’s going to become the leaf! I remember that from my roteiro!” For this student, the fact about how different parts of the bean turned into different parts of the plant were a narrative to him that he remembered because he had been actively engaged in its construction through his work in the roteiro. He remembered what was going to happen in the life cycle story of the bean and was eager to share it with his friends reminiscent of the way children share stories from books, TV shows, life events, and their imagination with each other. Although the work is individually-paced, students all complete the same work and are able to see each other, share their experiences, and help each other.

4.1.3 Challenges of roteiro learning method

Not all students who had experienced traditional schools liked the portfolio system, and many found it difficult to get used to. One boy complained, “This school is different. It’s difficult to adjust if you’re not used to it. It’s hard to finish everything.” Another student complained about struggling to get used to the roteiros, “I liked my old school more. I was there for seven years. I was used to it. I copied from the board. I only had to do work at home when the teacher assigned it. Here it’s more complicated. You have to do a lot of portfolios.”

Similarly, some students who had been at Amorim Lima since 1st grade found the roteiros to be boring. One boy said, “The roteiro is kind of boring.” When I asked why, he said, “studying is boring! I like recess. I like football!” Two other boys explained to me how they didn’t like the style of learning saying:

Boy 1: The roteiro is not great.

Boy 2: We have to do so many roteiros. It gets very tiring because it’s always the same. You do the same thing with each roteiro. I would like something different.

Me: Like what?

Bo 2: I don’t know.

Boy 1: Since we never went any other schools, we don’t know any other way.

Another challenge of the roteiro system is that since students are not forced to work, it can be very easy for some of them to get distracted and do other activities. One boy came into the library with his roteiro and his notebook. The librarian asked him, “What are you working on?” He said, “I’m making a drawing of minecraft!” His friend said, “we were both working on a roteiro about Zumbi, the leader of the slave rebellion, but he’s just drawing minecraft!” The student had been drawing minecraft zombies and hadn’t started working on the reading in his book yet. He said, “this is Zumbi!” and made fighting noises. The librarian looked at his drawing and found the picture and story of Zumbi in his book. The boy became interested in the image and then the story of the rebellion and began asking her questions about the fight. She said, “let’s see if we can find the answers in the story,” and they began reading together. With the help of his friend and the librarian, the student was able to finish the research on Zumbi and create his own drawing of Zumbi and then incorporate the story into his imaginary game and re-live the history of Brazil through entering the story. Without the help of the librarian, he might have had difficulty focusing on his reading.

This re-living of learning and continual sharing of knowledge via social processes characterizes portfolio-style learning as well as oral tradition learning, while the dialogic process between learner, material, and teacher via the reflections are characteristic of Freirian critical literacy. Thus, the portfolio is a narrative style of learning exemplifying both Freirian critical literacy and oral tradition learning via telling, re-telling, and living stories in social communities.

4.2 The Roda de Conversa – conversation circles

The roda de conversa, or conversation circle, is a second essential element to the democratic project at Amorim Lima because it gives students the opportunity to engage in debate and dialogue in a daily grade-level meeting. In the roda de conversa, every student and teacher has equal power to participate, and no single person dominates or leads the conversation. Sometimes a teacher brings up a topic to discuss, other times a student brings up a topic. Topics range from student behavior to local or national politics, planning school-wide events, bullying, racism, and health. Everyone has the chance to talk, and no one may talk over the person who is speaking. Students take turns speaking, sometimes raising their hands, sometimes jumping in, and teachers and students remind each other to listen respectfully when

someone is talking. Through the *roda de conversa*, conflicts are solved through a collective exchange of individual stories.

4.2.1 An example of a *roda de conversa*

I attended a *roda* where the principal joined because she wanted to discuss an important topic. The 9th graders and their teachers put their chairs in a circle, and they all waited five minutes until a girl who was in the bathroom returned. Ana, the principal, told everyone, “It has come to our attention that students have been smoking marijuana in the classrooms after school hours. One rumor is that students were smoking in the garden. Other rumors were that students were in the classroom unsupervised and smoking.”

Students responded raising their hands, “That’s absurd! No one would smoke in the classroom!” Ana responded, “A mother pulled her child out of the school. She called me and what happened was that she had heard rumors of marijuana at school.” When the principal raised this serious issue, she was not accusing students, but rather opening up the conversation to the rumors that were circulating and how they were impacting the school.

At first the students were very defensive, saying that these rumors were completely false. “You can’t smoke on school property in the garden if Julian (security guard) is always around. Julian plays football with the kids. He would have seen people smoking.” Another student responded, “You can [smoke], because people do!” Little by little, students began offering up information:

A girl: I would never say the names of the people who smoke because they’re friends.

A new boy: I would snitch

Another girl: But you don’t know who it was!

The new boy: I’ve been here for two months and on my second day I already knew that the garden was the place where people smoke.

Another student: The garden was the place where people smoke, but that ended three weeks ago. People don’t smoke there anymore. People go outside of the school walls to smoke, but on school property, they don’t.

The new boy: Stop smoking around the school!

Another girl: (in a mocking tone) OK, dad!

Ana, the principal: Isabela, do not be rude. Everyone has the right to speak.

As students became angry with one another and unable to reach agreement, the principal let the conversation continue without controlling it, but reminded everyone to be respectful. A teacher steered the discussion towards the issue of legality.

Teacher: If you are offering drugs to someone, even if they refuse, that's drug trafficking. That's illegal.

Student: That's not trafficking! Trafficking is selling! We don't sell.

A different student who wanted to show that he also knew information, said, "Somebody offered me marijuana, but I refused because I don't smoke. That was only last week, so we still have people who are smoking."

Teacher: OK, so we have confirmed that people were smoking on school property.

Another student: Listen, it was us who were smoking (she did not indicate who exactly), but we stopped three weeks ago.

By letting people tell their stories, the principal was able to confirm the rumors that people were smoking and have the students who were smoking admit in front of the class. However, instead of punishing them, she said, "Ok we are going to do a project on drugs because we think you need to know about them in order to make informed choices." Some students liked the idea of doing a project on drugs and wanted everyone to know about the health risks, while others said they already knew. Some students requested that the information not be one-sided and supporting a certain ideology that drugs are bad, but rather wanted all the information to let students make a decision. One student said that if they learned about other kinds of drugs, she would want to use them more.

A teacher raised a concern, "Everyone knows that marijuana is illegal and cannot be brought to school, OK? If you want to legalize it, you can go to protests in the street, but we have to follow the law." At this point, it seemed as though the discussion had reached a conclusion. The few students who had smoked had admitted it, and the points about legality and health had been made. However, suddenly, a student raised his hand and returned to the previous discussion of what had actually occurred a few weeks ago:

Student: I'm going to explain what happened a few weeks ago. There were two groups of students who were smoking during the after-school test prep class. But then one group started going off campus to smoke and the other group stopped smoking I think.

Teacher: So students were smoking DURING the evening class?

Another student: Yeah, at one point half of the class was smoking.

Other student: The test prep class was a marijuana party!

Different student: But that all ended. We haven't done that in three weeks.

The teachers and principal were outraged by this new information that half of the students had been coming to evening test-prep classes in order to smoke on school property! This piece of information came out as a result of a lot of people offering their small stories to the larger story in a safe space where they knew they would be listened to and respected. It was unclear to me whether students were sharing this information because they felt guilty and wanted to confess their actions or because they felt proud and wanted to boast that they knew information and were part of the rebellious groups. Maybe there was some of both.

Ana, the principal, and the other teachers tried to respond to this new information with their own stories saying, "You have to remember that you are representing Amorim Lima. We can't have a reputation of being the marijuana school! Imagine that I apply for a grant from the city government for a special project. Will they give it to me if we have that kind of reputation?" By sharing her own story, the principal helped the students imagine that they were in her position and used the respect that they have for her and the school to help them understand the seriousness of the situation.

Other students who had not spoken yet did not respond directly to her point, but rather began returning the conversation to the debate that occurred between the pro-smokers and the anti-smokers. A student said, "I agree with the students on both sides. I see the point that we don't want Amorim to have the reputation of being the marijuana party school, but I also know that some of you want to smoke, and I don't want to take that liberty away from you, but just don't do it in school."

With these kinds of comments, students began building a consensus of what to do. However, not all of the smokers were happy with that conclusion that they felt was taking away their freedom and said, "Everyone is repeating the same thing!" Ana, the principal, said, "OK, let everyone speak! We're going to respect each other." She continued by showing the amount of freedom and trust she had given the students, "I could require that you all stay in the classrooms with teachers at all times and not circulate freely through the school, but we don't do that." "I would jump out of the window!" a student responded. Ana continued by showing how students had broken her trust, "We don't do that [require teacher supervision] because

we believe that you are responsible. We trust you. We trust you not to smoke on school property. OK, so we are all in agreement now, and everyone understands that you can't smoke on school property."

It was unclear whether this discussion was over, but a boy was ready to end the conversation and said, "I think we've talked about this enough because when you talk and talk, people start adding stories, and some people invent stories, and the problem grows. I think we should leave this for a while, do the small research project on drugs and health and see if the marijuana problem stops. If we still have problems we should address it in another circle."

Ana agreed, and added, "I would never search the school. I would never call the police. That is not the policy of the school, and that would never happen. But this cannot continue. I will not let this problem continue without doing something." She did not specify what she would do, but it was clear to the students that she was on their side, yet also very opposed to what they had done.

4.2.2 Dialogue and discussion in the roda de conversa

The fact that everyone had a chance to speak without judgement or punishment meant that the whole story emerged to the surface as each student told a part. Students who had been causing the issue saw how their actions impacted others, and students who were bothered by the marijuana felt supported to share their opinions and let others know. Finally, the principal was able to help the students see the issue from her perspective as a school leader and how she was on the side of the students, but was also not happy to answer for their mistakes when a mother pulled her child out of the school because of the problem. I don't know if the problem was resolved, but I was very impressed with the level of genuine dialogue between students and teachers.

One student told me that the roda de conversa is just a way to practice dialogue, but it does not really solve conflicts. He said that conflicts are solved in mini-dialogues and discussions between individuals behind the scene. Teachers, parents, administrators, and students have discussions inside and outside of the roda de conversa in which they tell stories of their experiences, validate each other, disagree respectfully, attempt to understand other perspectives, and learn to live and work with people who have differences in opinions. Students do not al-

ways agree with their teachers and administrators; however, since they feel respected by these adults, they also show respect to these adults, and attempt to behave responsibly.

Sometimes students make mistakes and do not live up to the responsibility and trust that they are given at a school with no rules and punishments. The *roda de conversa* is a way for them to self-reflect collectively and learn from their mistakes. A student-teacher at the school told me:

a few weeks ago, a dermatologist came to talk to the 7th graders about skin care and acne. The presentation was very boring, and the students were extremely rude to her. One of the teachers brought it up at the *roda de conversa*. She asked the class what they thought of their behavior during the presentation. All of the students admitted that they had been rude and did not treat the guest with respect. They realized their mistake and were disappointed with themselves for being so immature. They said that even though the presentation was boring, ‘this person was taking time out of her busy day to come all the way to Amorim Lima for free to try to talk to us. Even though we didn’t like the presentation, we still could have been respectful.’ Other students talked about how they were actually interested in what she was saying, but couldn’t pay attention because of how rude everyone was being.

Through this conversation, the students were able to empathize with the presenter who was doing her best. Though it was too late to solve the conflict because the presentation was over, the students realized through the discussion how their behavior impacted other people.

The alternative school discipline system of no punishments and a high degree of freedom for students at Amorim Lima does not mean that students are always 100% respectful. However, the *roda de conversa* helps students learn from their mistakes by empathizing with those whom they have disrespected by reflecting on events through storytelling. Students talk about what happened, why it happened, and how different people were impacted in a way that makes them develop a sense of responsibility for their own behavior. This responsibility develops, not because they want to avoid punishment or receive a reward, but because they feel responsible for the students and teachers in the *roda de conversa* and know they will be held accountable for discussing their actions in the daily *roda de conversa*.

Dialogue in the *roda de conversa* is based on sharing honestly and listening without judgment and is an opportunity for students to learn to express their opinions and develop empathy. It is also a place to build community based on appreciating diverse opinions and experiences and dealing with conflict on a daily basis. Telling and listening to stories is essential to developing appreciation for others and for understanding one’s role in the community. It is

through conversation in the *roda de conversa* that students learn to value each other for their differences and learn to work together to solve problems.

Democratic education at Amorim Lima, rooted in the *roda de conversa*, is based on the sharing of narratives in a daily process where students develop the capacity for empathy through imagination by re-living someone else's perspective by listening to their stories. I was impressed with art of storytelling that all of the students and teachers seemed to have to the extent that everyone in the conversation became witness to the events surrounding the marijuana issue, even those who did not personally experience them. This reflects Hâmpaté-Bâ's (1999) discussion of storytelling in the oral tradition as re-living a perspective on events in the past. For Hâmpaté-Bâ, storytelling:

is a matter not of remembering, but of bringing up into the present a past event in which everyone participates – the person who is reciting and his audience. The whole art of the storyteller lies in that. No one is a storyteller unless he can report a thing as it happened 'live' in such a way that his hearers, like himself, become new living, active, witnesses of it. (Hâmpaté-Bâ 1999, p. 199)

Hâmpaté-Bâ describes stories as processes of a participatory witnessing, while Freire (1994) describes dialogue as:

fed by love, humanity, hope, faith, and trust. Because of this, only dialogue communicates. And when both poles of the dialogue link like this, with love, with hope, with faith in the other, they become critical in the search for something and they produce a relationship of empathy between both. Only here is communication. (p. 68)

Both Freire and Hâmpaté-Bâ emphasize the importance of entering into a relationship with another perspective through communication. The *roda de conversa* is the place where students develop these relationship-building skills through stories.

4.3 Collective school-wide projects

Even more than the portfolios or the conversation circles, the school-wide projects such as the vegetable garden, the indigenous house, the drum and capoeira circles, and the cultural festivals truly exemplify how oral tradition learning engages children with their culture, history, and the world around them. The description of the capoeira project on the Amorim Lima website describes the importance of the oral tradition in Brazilian culture including capoeira as one of these components of oral tradition:

The oral tradition has as a fundamental characteristic the tireless reliable repetition of the discourse of the narrated fact, this so that there is a reproduction of the narrative that should be passed down from old generations to the new, it becomes necessary a simple language associated with the dynamic day to day of the individual (it can also be a story or myth linked to the ancestrality of the group) and/or of his community. A hierarchy and the recognition that the knowledge of the oldest are fundamental points, they are the apex of the foundation of the maintenance of the traditions of orality, this is recognized and expressed in the manifestations of popular culture...(Amorim Lima website, February 20, 2018)

Amorim Lima uses school-wide, collective projects to involve students in contributing to larger national historical processes and projects that question the dominant imported educational system in favor of Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian ways of storing and sharing knowledge. Such projects include a school-wide garden, a yearly festival of culture, an Afro-Brazilian project involving drumming classes, capoeira lessons, and music classes, and an indigenous house on the school property. All of these activities are outside of the formal roteiros containing the national curriculum; however, they are essential sources of learning about history for the students.

4.3.1 The Garden

Students take different turns to clean the school yard and the garden. They are allowed to pick and eat the fruit when they want, but are encouraged not to be greedy and to share with each other. Two students pointed out little ants crawling in a line into the garden. “Look at those ants carrying leaves! Everyone says they’re very beautiful,” and the other added, “But lift your foot, because if not, they’re going to sting you.”

Another group of young girls asked if I wanted to see the vegetable garden. A girl said, “Look, you can eat this plant. We eat it a lot, you have to wash it first,” and she gave it to me to eat. Another girl added, “This is pineapple, this is starfruit, those are beans,” and a third girl added, “And look, this plant has a natural bug spray. Put it on you.” The first girl said, “And you can eat this one too if you want. It’s like a medicine.” I was surprised at how much they knew about the plants, and asked which teacher taught them. They said, “these are just things everyone knows.” They explained, “we’re in the garden chores group, so once a week we come with the teacher to take care of the garden, and every day during recess we also come on our own to take care of it. Do you like starfruit?” I said that I did. A girl said, “we’re going to get some down for you.” Another added, “there used to be a stump here that we would use to climb the tree, but they moved the stump over there.” They climbed the tree and exclaimed,

“It’s great up here! Are you scared of heights?” I said that I was, a little. A girl replied, “Too bad, you would have liked it up here in the tree.”

Another time, a boy at recess started showing me around the school, “Here, we have lots of plants. You can eat half of them like-- HEY! That’s the bird’s house.” Suddenly he pointed up to a mud globe perched near the top of a post. He exclaimed, “She makes the house herself and makes an entrance so that when it rains, no water gets in. The entry is always facing away from the storm. You can tell which way the storm will come that year based on the bird’s house.” I was quite impressed and asked if I learned this in biology. He said, “No, we don’t have biology yet.” I continued, “so how do you know all this?” He answered, “my grandma told me, and she didn’t even finish 5th grade. Come to the garden. I love this vegetable and I eat it a lot. It’s delicious.” He gave me a leaf, “do you want to eat more? Take this one, it’s really good.” Projects such as the garden keep folk knowledge, knowledge passed down orally and through experience from older generations, alive. The garden helps students value folk learning just as much as they value other kinds of learning.

4.3.2 The Indigenous house

Another way that students learn about and experience traditional Brazilian culture is through a project with a local indigenous community. The students visited the indigenous reserve on a field trip, and then worked with the indigenous people to build a traditional mud house in the school yard. The indigenous house project grew out of a connection that a parent had with the indigenous community and became part of the daily experience of children at recess.

When I visited, the indigenous house had burned down, and the students and parents were in the process of raising money to build a new one. No one knew how the fire got started, but a parent told me that these houses were not built to last a long time. They were not permanent houses because of the annual flooding that the area received. The roof had to be continuously re-built every year and the entire indigenous community worked together on all the houses to rebuild them.

A child told me, “The straw roof of the indigenous house burned down, and we rebuilt it. The mud walls fell down, and we rebuilt them. Then it fell down again, and nobody rebuilt it. In a few years, they’ll come back to the school to help us build another one.” The space that the indigenous house left was a reminder to all of the students, parents, and teachers of the fact

that culture and historical knowledge was not only static, permanent, and stored in libraries, but was also a continual process of knowledge passed down from generations that required continuous collective participation in order to maintain.

4.3.3 Capoeira, drumming, and music classes

In addition to passing on knowledge in the garden and via the maintenance of the indigenous house, students enter into a larger historical narrative in weekly capoeira classes and music classes. Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian art form that the slaves developed in order to disguise their combat training as a dance set to music.

Children at Amorim Lima sing the songs that slaves sang as they trained to fight against the slaveholders and practice the same movements that Afro-Brazilian slaves used to prepare to rebel against the slaveholders. The tradition of capoeira is a folk tradition passed down from one capoeira master to the next and practiced and developed in the streets and on the beaches. Every song and movement has symbolic significance linked to African and Afro-Brazilian deities, religion, dance, and language (Downey 2005). The capoeira project at Amorim Lima is part of a national project to bring capoeira to public schools across the country as part of a movement to recognize Afro-Brazilian heritage. For some students, capoeira classes was where they most identified with their learning. One student said, “I don’t like the portfolios. They’re boring.” I asked, “What do you like?” He said, “I like capoeira.”

Similarly, music is taught via the folk learning method of a jam session. The teacher plays the guitar and students sing, clap, and dance along. They learn the words to songs by listening and repeating over and over rather than by reading from a music book. In the music session I watched, some students played instruments they had brought from home including drums, a kazoo, a tiny plastic guitar, a few recorders, and a toy accordion. A few energetic students were running around and dancing to each of the songs. The music teacher engaged students in stories about the histories of different songs and gave them the freedom to experiment with their instruments. By singing traditional Brazilian songs and learning in an oral tradition method, the students were connected to larger historical narratives of Brazilian culture.

4.3.4 School-wide festivals

The school-wide festivals are an essential way that students practice their traditional culture and learn through folk education. Before the festivals, students, teachers, and families make arts and crafts to sell to raise money for the festivals.

During the festa de junina, they learn traditional maypole dances from parents and also make up their own songs and dances. Students stay after school decorating the maypoles, practicing their dances, and organizing the snacks and drinks they will serve. During the carnival festival, parents who have worked on creating floats for different São Paulo samba schools come and teach the children to make the giant typical dolls that are essential to any carnival parade. These carnival dolls are a part of a Brazilian traditional history that was a form of resistance through humor and mockery during the carnival season. During the school's festival of culture, students vote on a school-wide theme and create performances and events based on that theme. This year's theme was music, and the music teacher encouraged students to explore a variety of Brazilian historical genres rather than focusing on imported commercial music from the USA that is popular in Brazil today.

Children learn to honor their ancestral traditions and understand experientially how they are a part of larger Brazilian cultural traditions. A mother told me:

it was really a collective community project that began the Amorim Lima project. It was a bunch of mothers coming together to raise money to do things differently at the school. We had mothers making giant carnival puppets, making crafts, cooking food. They came together every week to build a different school. Little by little, the project started getting bigger and bigger, and now we have lots of family participation and community participation.

These collective projects are central to the democratic project at Amorim Lima because they emphasize the collective nature of Brazilian traditional culture. Democracy is not only debating and voting on issues but also involves a collaborative and collective process of building consensus and creating change.

Collective projects are essential to the democratic project at Amorim Lima because they require individual students and parents to take initiative and work together to create larger projects. Through these projects, the school community celebrates traditional Brazilian folk heritage both in the content of the projects, Afro-Brazilian music, dance, local plants etc., and in the way that the projects develop, collectively through self-organized spontaneous collaboration and passing on of folk knowledge to others through experience and stories. These projects allow students to see themselves as part of a larger folk history and to experience that

history and culture. This is important for the educational project at Amorim Lima because, in addition to preparing students to succeed on national exams and gain nationally-dictated content material, the school-wide projects also show students the value of alternative knowledge and ways learning. Each individual is not only responsible for his or her own learning and behavior, but is also responsible for actively participating in traditional culture and learning historical knowledge in order to pass it on orally to younger students through participation and performance in school-wide collective projects. Through participation in these projects, traditional Brazilian culture including legends, songs, traditions, and stories become part of students' everyday lives. These projects teach students experientially and connect them to ancestral narratives and knowledge.

5 Discussion on the findings

This school ethnography used the São Paulo public democratic school, Amorim Lima, as a case study for democratic education. Through participant observation in classes, events, and activities, and short and long interviews with students, families, and teachers, several key elements emerged as the pillars of the democratic project at this school. These included the portfolio method of independent student-driven learning, the daily restorative justice conversation circles, and the community involvement in traditions and celebrations honoring Brazilian cultural heritage.

This research began when a friend invited me to see the school in action, and as I visited more and more, I began to write notes that would become an ethnography. While I did not originally plan on researching the school for the master's thesis, I began spending so much time there observing the projects, meeting people, practicing my Portuguese, and even participating in after-school classes and activities, that my personal journal entries about the experience morphed into field notes that became an ethnography.

I chose this topic because I wanted to use Amorim Lima as a case study for a democratic school with the hopes of one day participating in the creation of a democratic school. Amorim Lima is a case study of school reform, and specifically of self-directed learning, collaborative learning, and restorative communal practices of mediation and decision-making. While its context is uniquely Brazilian, elements such as the transformation process of the school, and the structures and processes that organize the school could be used to inspire or as guide schools in other cultural contexts, especially those that face similar problems of disengaged students, violence, and an educational system and curriculum that is very distant from students' daily realities.

Amorim Lima demonstrates that it is possible for an educational institution to reform an imported education system at the school level. Amorim Lima's reform is uniquely Brazilian by combining Paulo Freire's call for post-colonial emancipatory education based on critical literacy and discussion with pre-colonial oral tradition methods of teaching and learning based on exploration, experiences, and the exchange of stories.

Amorim Lima's democratic project emerged as a result of the principal and several parents attempting to solve the schools' problem of teacher and student absenteeism and violence.

Through discussions with parents and teachers, a visit to the Escola de Ponte in Portugal, and a wide network with the community. Ana Siqueira the principal, and a team of parents and teachers gradually transformed the school over 10 years into the democratic project that it has today. Slowly, involved parents got other parents involved, and families from all over the city applied to have their children enrolled in this innovative public school. Through individually-paced learning tasks, daily conversation circles, and collective projects, children were motivated to come to school and learn on their own even when teachers were absent. In the conversation circles, children learned to communicate and listen to solve conflicts, and the principal had fewer disciplinary issues to deal with. Parents got other parents involved with the school festivals and gardens, and students began discovering and practicing traditional Brazilian culture that was not part of the national curriculum.

5.1 Self-paced curriculum and self-regulation of learning

The first major change in the school was the shift to student-centered individual learning portfolios called roteiros. This innovation was in response to high teacher absenteeism and budget cuts so that students could continue advancing in the material even when their teachers were absent. Rather than attending classes and completing scheduled assignments, students in the portfolio system are given a series of projects, questions, and tasks that cover the entire curriculum for that year. Students may organize their own schedules to complete those tasks at their own pace as long as they complete at least one section per week. They then write a reflection of each portfolio, teachers provide feedback on their work, and then the students respond to the feedback. Students can work on their own schedule and at school or at home. In addition, they attend workshops in school to get hands-on experience in math, science, writing skills, music, and art. In the upper grades, they also complete an independent research project on a topic of their choice.

The portfolio method of learning helps students develop self-regulation skills, increases motivation, and offers students more agency in their learning. Students who transitioned from traditional schools to Amorim Lima highlighted the contrast in their motivation, engagement, and ability to remember knowledge with the portfolio system as compared to their previous schools. They described how the portfolios taught them to set goals for themselves, manage their time, seek out other resources, and reflect on their learning. All of these self-reported

skills demonstrate the development of self-regulation skills, essential to self-efficacy and life-long learning (Zimmerman 1990; Pintrich 1999).

Students at Amorim Lima become involved in the narrative construction of their learning through their portfolios. These active, collaborative, narrative approaches to learning reflect Freire's call for a new narrative relationship between students and schools (Freire 1979; 1983) in which students actively engage with their material and with their teachers through dialogue. Through the roteiro learning process, students listen to stories from older students, discuss the material with each other, and write their own stories of their learning process in a way that is similar oral tradition framework for learning based on the re-living of knowledge through shared practices and stories as described by Murunduku (2012) and Hâmpaté-Bâ (2010).

5.2 Conversation circles as restorative justice practices

The second major change in the school was the implementation of daily conversation circles called *rodas de conversa*. During these 30–60 minute group meetings, all 40 students from an age group meet to openly discuss a topic. Students take turns speaking, and anyone who wants to talk may talk for as long as they like. Teachers and staff also partake in the circle and do not control the flow of conversation, but rather participate as equals. As a group, the students and teachers regulate the discussion and make sure that everyone is listened to and has a chance to speak. Through the conversation circles, students debate global and local current events and solve disciplinary disagreements such as bullying, dress code, and drug use at the school.

Conversation circles, or restorative justice circles, are being used more and more by schools and criminal justice systems with a focus on restoring justice and building relationships rather than giving out ineffective punishments (McCluskey et al 2008; Grossi 2012). In my observation of the conversation circle about the students' use of marijuana on campus during school hours, I witnessed students and teachers expressing their viewpoints on how and why this became an issue and what they could do to change the situation. As the conversation progressed, the truth came out that over half of the class had been involved with smoking on campus, many students did not like that their peers were smoking in school. Eventually, the students who were involved admitted to their mistake and agreed to stop.

Conversation circles turn student mistakes into learning experiences whereby students reflect on the impact their actions have on the community as a whole. By engaging in dialogue, they realize the diversity of perspectives in their community and find a way to reach an agreement on how to live with their differences. The trust students and teachers place in one another to listen and share stories reflects Freire's call for a new student-teacher relationship based on dialogue (1979, 1983) as well as the learning through story sharing typical of oral tradition cultures (Murunduku 2012; Hâmpaté-Bâ 2010).

5.3 School-wide projects honoring Brazilian oral tradition learning

The third major transformation that took place in Amorim Lima's democratic school transition was the collaborative effort of many parents and community members creating school-wide projects celebrating Brazilian culture. These projects included a festival of culture, capoeira classes, drum circles, the construction of a vegetable garden, an indigenous Brazilian house built in the yard, and many other events and fundraisers related to traditional holidays like Carnival and the Festa de Junina. It was through an arts and crafts volunteer day to raise money for the school that I discovered that Amorim Lima is really a community-wide cultural center and part of the revitalization of the working class Butantã neighborhood.

For the students, these cultural events connect them with the community beyond the classroom and motivate many of them to come to school. Additionally, the type of learning that occurs when students come together to work in the garden or learn traditional songs and dance moves is part of the oral tradition learning that has always been central to Brazilian culture (Murunduku 2012). The link between school and community and between children and their parents and grandparents is strengthened, and knowledge becomes part of an oral tradition, whereby everyone practices and contributes to the creation of culture and knowledge (Hâmpaté-Bâ 2010). Ultimately, by creating a space where students can gain and pass down folk knowledge, Amorim Lima connects them to a larger historical narrative of Brazilian folk culture, a combination of indigenous, African, and European folk cultures resisting the forces of globalization, colonialism, capitalism, and an imported educational system.

5.4 Principal Siqueira's Leadership

A major person central to the Amorim Lima project is the principal, Ana Siqueira, who has led the transformation of the school over the past 10 years. While she was supported by a strong community of parents and teachers, without her leadership, Amorim Lima would not be the radically democratic school it is today. The music teacher described Ana's ability to relate to teachers, parents, political leaders, local bureaucrats, educators from other countries, researchers, university students, community members, artists, musicians, and businesses, saying, "Ana knows how to *mexer* everything." *Mexer* is a Portuguese verb that means to move, to mix, or to shake. This word beautifully illustrates how Ana is a transformational school leader who moves and mixes people and ideas. While Ana Siqueira downplays her role in the creation of the school, highlighting the collaborative work of parents and teachers, all of the parents and teachers I spoke with had stories about Siqueira's openness to new ideas and charisma to make them happen.¹

5.5 Diverse opinions about improving Amorim Lima

While Amorim Lima seems like an ideal place to learn and teach, the school is not perfect, and it is important to note that I heard many criticisms from students, parents, and teachers during my observations. Most of the criticisms from students who had never studied in traditional schools were that the portfolios were repetitive, tedious, and boring. These criticisms were mostly from young boys who said they preferred activities like soccer and capoeira. Other criticisms came from students who switched from traditional schools to Amorim Lima. They had trouble adjusting to self-paced work and were overwhelmed and had trouble organizing themselves to complete all of the work at a regular pace.

Parents also questioned whether Amorim Lima would prepare their students enough for traditional learning settings in high school and college when they would be required to take standardized tests and attend classes on a set schedule. I spoke with two graduates who now attended traditional high schools, and they found their new schools to be boring, and they also had trouble adjusting to testing because they weren't used to studying for tests.

Other parents thought that the school was too parent-driven, and not enough of the initiative for new projects came from the students themselves. Clearly, the school is not a perfect learn-

¹ It needs to be added that I have the permission to use the principal's real name which is also available on the school's website.

ing institution for all people; however, it continues to evolve and has the processes in place for all members to have a voice to express their opinions and create new initiatives.

5.6 Gaps and biases in my study

A major weakness in my research is my position as an outsider to Brazilian culture and language and the Brazilian educational system. Because I am still learning Portuguese, I undoubtedly missed many conversations, double meanings, jokes, references, and details in stories that a native speaker would have understood. Also, because I am not familiar with the traditional Brazilian public school system, I am unable to compare Amorim Lima with other public schools in order to understand how different it is. While I did get to visit some public schools during my studies in São Paulo, I do not have an in-depth personal knowledge of the Brazilian educational system.

Another gap in the research is on the actual educational outcomes of the students. While I heard from many parents and teachers that Amorim Lima students test into the top public high schools in the city, I did not actually see that data. From the questions that students asked me to the way they articulated thoughtful opinions of complex issues, it was clear to me that students were learning on a deep level; however, further evidence of their skills and knowledge would be useful.

The main biases that I brought to the research were a favorable viewpoint of the school, and I realize that I was always finding positive, innovative, and interesting details about the building, the learning, and the school community to record in my notes. While I did record criticisms of the school that students, parents, and teachers told me, I know that I did not dwell on certain problems like massive teacher absenteeism, not enough budget to pay for needed repairs, not enough special education teachers for students with disabilities, trash in the school yard, and robbery and graffiti in the neighborhood. It was not an active choice to ignore these problems, but rather a focus on what made Amorim Lima different from other public schools in São Paulo.

5.7 Ethical issues involved with this research

I began this project in an unethical way by participating and observing in the school without asking for permission from the school leaders. At first, I was not planning on conducting re-

search at Amorim Lima and was only observing the school with my friend doing her internship there and then volunteering with parents who invited me to help out as a community member with the library project and different fundraisers. However, as I got more involved with Amorim Lima and was visiting almost every day, I knew that this was turning into a research project, and I would need permission from the school officials.

Eventually the principal confronted me, and I told her I had been helping out because I wanted to create a democratic project of my own someday. Not only did she give me permission to spend time at the school, she was the one who told me to turn my visits into a research project. After that, I began informing people at the school that I was conducting research when I spoke with them, and I always asked for verbal permission to use their stories in my research. I have been as truthful as possible in my sharing of the stories from my time at Amorim Lima.

5.8 Implications and uses of this study in schools and classrooms

Researching Amorim Lima helped me realize that educational reform does not require massive educational policy changes or massive amounts of funding but can actually occur within the confines of the current educational systems. Despite policies, regulations, and very limited resources, public schools still have a certain amount of freedom to educate children according to the needs of the community. I have always thought of democratic schools as being only possible in developed countries for wealthy students; however, Amorim Lima shows that this is not the case. This study does not suggest that other schools wishing to start a democratic project should copy Amorim Lima, but rather they can be inspired by the way the school community solved its problems of student and teacher absenteeism and violence in a highly innovative way unique to the local cultural and historical context.

6 Conclusive remarks

This school ethnography case study of the elementary and middle school, Amorim Lima, illustrates that a public school can transform itself to create a participatory and experiential learning environment for students of all backgrounds. This ten-year transformation process required the leadership of the principal, the dedication of many parents, and the input of children, teachers, community members, and the Escola da Ponte democratic school in Portugal.

Amorim Lima students described how directing their own learning, listening and sharing in conversation circles, and organizing school-wide festivals helped them remember what they learned, appreciate different opinions, resolve conflict, feel more connected to their culture, and enjoy going to school. The school offers a Brazilian model for public education that exhibits the critical literacy and dialogue championed by Paulo Freire as well as the learning through experiencing and sharing stories that lies at the heart of the oral tradition.

This research influenced me personally as a New York public charter school teacher by inspiring me to organize large cultural celebrations with students and their families for Hispanic Heritage month and to make a shift towards using Amorim Lima's portfolio style of student-centered learning activities and projects. I hope that school leaders and teachers can benefit from learning about Amorim Lima in order to implement similar changes in their own educational settings to make learning a more meaningful and joyful process for students. Furthermore, I hope that other education students and researchers will be interested in visiting Amorim Lima and get to experience firsthand the vibrancy of the Amorim Lima community. I am grateful to everyone in Brazil and Finland who helped me experience and learn from my time at Amorim Lima.

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