

## **Encounter as empowerment: a critical approach to participatory design research with marginalised youth**

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## ***Encounter as empowerment: a critical approach to participatory design research with marginalised youth***

### **Abstract:**

*This paper presents participatory design research conducted with marginalized young people from São Paulo, Brazil. The project consisted of two activities that used mapping and board games to explore instabilities and uncertainties in the participants' communities. The workshops aimed to foster encounters and highlight the capabilities and agency of young people. The resulting visual methods captured the participants' experiences of the urban landscape, demonstrating the potential for participatory design research to address social issues and empower marginalized communities.*

**Keywords:** *Participatory design research, Marginalized youth, Urban landscape*

## **Encontro como empoderamento: uma abordagem crítica à pesquisa de design participativo com jovens marginalizados**

**Resumo:** Este artigo apresenta uma pesquisa de design participativo realizada com jovens marginalizados de São Paulo, Brasil. O projeto consistiu em duas atividades que utilizaram mapeamento e jogos de tabuleiro para explorar instabilidades e incertezas nas comunidades dos participantes. As oficinas tiveram como objetivo promover encontros e destacar as capacidades e a agência dos jovens. Os métodos visuais resultantes capturaram as experiências dos participantes sobre a paisagem urbana, demonstrando o potencial da pesquisa em design participativo para abordar questões sociais e capacitar comunidades marginalizadas

**Palavras-chave:** Pesquisa em design participativo, Juventude marginalizada, Paisagem urbana

## 1. Introduction & goals

The first words placed define the space. (DRUCKER, 2023, p.1)

The research discussed here explores the potential for utilising participatory design research approaches to formulate and articulate new narratives for imaginary or speculative futures. These are founded upon a commitment to the potential for addressing challenges of marginalisation and social inequality through diverse dialogical practices, and, in this paper, we focus on collaborative workshop experiences which facilitate what we have come to call ‘sites of encounter’ - the co-creation of new spaces for making together and for meaningful exchange. Our goal, therefore, is situated within a context of social transformation in the lives of youth at the margins, deemed unimportant or undeserving.

In this paper we describe research with marginalized young people from the care systems of São Paulo state in Brazil. We discuss a range of experiences from a participatory design workshop which, initially, sought to explore instabilities and uncertainties as they might be written and drawn by young people into and through their maps of home, home life and the landscape of their immediate communities. Over the course of the workshop these vernacular maps became the locus for a very particular kind of innovative social dreaming - being used as the basis for an imaginary and speculative ‘game of life’ which looked to challenge, disrupt or circumvent the difficulties that had been identified as ones faced in participants’ everyday journeys across their maps and in their lives when moving within the city.

Conceptually, our research is keen to explore the map as a distinct mode of diagrammatic visualisation which brings together a diverse range of line, shape, texture, tone and colour (alongside textual and typographic elements). The word or term ‘diagram’ comes from the Greek, meaning ‘to write through’, is most commonly applied to a particular use of image or illustration and commonly used as a means through which we are shown *how things are organised*.

Formalised methods for visualisation appear to be substantially dependent upon hegemonic aesthetic tropes whose use has established and sustained dominant - institutional - notions of objectivity, authenticity and authority which imbue designed diagrammatic objects and their narratives with a seemingly unchallengeable sense of certainty. As Hall and Davila (2022) have discussed, a more critical approach to visualisation - within which we situate the activities outlined in this paper - can suggest other, more open.

realms through which the opportunity for an imaginative or speculative type of narrative to be developed, while still being located in the everyday.

As Dávila (2019) argues, diagrams work chiefly as communicative methods - to articulate and highlight relationships and situations that concern hierarchy, agency, and sites of situated power (within which we often work and live). The characteristics or gestural specificity of our participants' diagrammatic visualisation and their meaning offer us can communicate and reveal hidden or invisible landscapes just below the everyday skin of the common street map. Practices of articulation are often closely linked to a need for restoration or of repair, and the participants' collaborative translation (and re-articulation) of their individual mapping insights into models for playful, critical and speculative board games generated a range of novel strategies for reshaping their own experiences within these sites of encounter (the workshop, their individual maps and the future narratives within their games) towards a potential for transformation.

The model and methods employed in our São Paulo workshop (and discussed in this paper) had been developed from a series of activities which were explored during our participation in the SEEYouth Project between 2020 and 2022. SEEYouth (Solutions for Engaging and Empowering Youth with Trans-Atlantic Mirroring) worked with young people in Brazil, Canada and in Finland with an intention of exploring how social innovation through participatory art and design empowers youth at the margins. By using participatory approaches in social contexts which are complex and often difficult to understand, the SEEYouth project team employed a in-depth and holistic approach, founded on an idea of 'Trans-Atlantic Mirroring' (T-AM) which sought to co-create innovative tools and methods which could be portable, dynamic and responsive to specific local needs but which, through them being shared, could identify common experiences and insights. Such connections between marginalized youth in very different situations helped to identify new contexts for youth engagement and empowerment, generate innovative outcomes, and increase the practical application, scalability and impact to help reduce youth marginalisation across the globe.

Working with colleagues in São Paulo children's youth and protective court, 30 workshop participants were recruited who were either in the child and youth welfare system or under socio-educational measures. They were accompanied by 17 adult companions who, although present, were not asked to engage in the workshop activities. One group of participants joined the workshop while in the care of the youth court and so were accompanied

by their institutional wardens or guards.<sup>1</sup> The workshop took place in the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of São Paulo<sup>2</sup>. Given the intention and scope of our research, the context for the workshop and the dynamic variables when working with young people, we were particularly interested in the potential for using low-fidelity, analogue visual methods — selecting the simplest of tools and the most basic of materials to give the time and opportunity for participants to have a more direct or immediate response and engagement with workshop activities. Methods for generating individual and community narrative can be situated directly within creative participatory activities and a use of certain contextual prompts and a constrained methodological lens can encourage dialogue between individuals and within the group. The potential for developing stories-as-narratives, and for dialogue to facilitate connections between participants, were key considerations in how we approached the design of the workshop.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Critical visualisation

A use of methods of critical visualisation for participatory map-making brings focus to ways in which relationships are materialised across, in and through space and highlights their potential value as a means to elicit narrative through visual storytelling which articulates experiences shaped through and by place.

To explore perceptions and expressions of landscape-as-narrative, Keller Easterling's (2016) concept of infrastructure space presents us with a theoretical lens through which we are able to consider how participants' stories are situated within and from the material and immaterial urban networks which constitute so much of the contemporary city.

Furthermore, Easterling's identification of disposition as the means to describe the readable patterns often apparent upon the surfaces of infrastructure space reinforces a potential for mapping as visual method, and its capacity to articulate the range of complex entanglements emerging from

- 1 While we use the word 'guard' to acknowledge the formal role of the officers who accompanied this particular group of youth, their presence within the workshop was far more nuanced than the word might suggest - mostly observing, monitoring and, when necessary, accompanying youth within the environment of the Faculty building.
- 2 Alongside each of the three co-authors of this paper, the workshop was facilitated by staff and students and, in particular, we acknowledge the vital assistance given by Myrna Nascimento and Rosana Vasquez in both the design and facilitation of the workshop.

the intersections of human and non-human, material and immaterial - visible and invisible that form much of urban experience.

Disposition is immanent, not in the moving parts, but in the relationships between the components (EASTERLING, 2016, p.72)

Landscape, therefore, can be read - and written - in terms of how it is shaped by formal and informal social, civic or economic infrastructure. A use of critical visualisation for participatory mapping suggests the possibility to explore ways in which landscape and its infrastructural disposition embodies or materialises hierarchies and experiences of power and, importantly, how ways in which everyday knowledges offer a means through which they can be challenged and resisted.

Within the context of participatory art and design methods, we recognise the form of the map as a social construction which, throughout its histories, is often used a medium for imposing and sustaining power relations. Through an exploration of the potential for critical and participatory map-making, our research also acknowledges that a plurality of formal approaches (in their production) are possible and, we would argue, are becoming ever more necessary as a means to directly confront the ever-urgent challenges faced in everyday life.

Jeremy Crampton (2001) describes how a pursuit of plurality in any exploration of the potential for critical and participatory mapping can be established by way of four principles:

- a recognition that maps are 'sites of power-knowledge'
- a need to privilege marginalized or excluded experience
- a desire to de-emphasise formal methods and systems used in their design
- a recognition that maps will (and should) only be considered transient - 'created and erased many times over'

The approach taken in this work, therefore, is shaped by an idea that emerging or new narratives of landscape can emerge through the development of novel methods for participatory and critical mapping.

## **2.2 Diagrammatic writing**

In her short book of the same name, Johanna Drucker (2023) outlines a theoretical framework for understanding what she terms diagrammatic writing and positions this model as one which can describe the inherent power of graphic design as a practice of visual meaning-making. For Drucker, practices of diagrammatic writing work through its capacity to actively construct form (and format), and by the ways in which visualisation continually

shapes our expectations of and interactions with the dynamic spaces of page or screen.

Drucker's concepts are particularly valuable to this research in terms of how they help us to describe and understand human actions — the movements which results in a mark or line, and actions which also work to place other marks in or around each other and the action and intentions of design and designing.

Within the context of this research, therefore, we can come to understand activities of map-making within participatory contexts as a particular form of 'diagrammatic (life) writing'.

This statement is below. The first principles involve relative position. All positions are relative. Next to can be far from or close to. (DRUCKER, 2023, p.12)

By describing two primary moves or tactics which can be used to characterise and categorise this paper's focus, Drucker brings attention to our participants' maps as descriptions of placement and relation. These 'first principles' allow for a reading of the maps which aims to identify emergent personal counter-narratives - the stories which point to instances of socio-cultural association as a means for revealing those dispositions of infrastructural space described by Easterling (2016).

Our associations of value change according and its affordance. Diagrams [as writing'] optimise the efficiency of proximity. They spatialise semantic values into a legible value system. (DRUCKER, 2023, p.12)

### 2.3 Through open space

The mapping exercise involved participatory engagement through presentation and feedback by peers to discursive and visual notations of a personal location/milieu within the proximity of a local community setting and further afield within the wider spatial configurations of the city as a whole. The emerging visual and textual data provided insights as to notions of dwelling within the group of participants. Daniel Willis offers insights as to the phenomenological dimension of (architectural) place in relation to dwelling:

Dwelling is the imaginative counterpart to physical living. While a living body can be defined by any number of technical considerations, such as the presence of respiration or brain wave activity, dwelling requires that this person 'feels' at home. (WILLIS, 1999, p.147)

Workshop participants then worked together in small groups on a second activity which looked to extend their shared understanding of the city's tangible or metaphorical spaces, surfaces and stories. Within their group they were asked to imagine a future which could be drawn onto an image of the city, and visualised as a journey through its streets. We highlighted that this journey would no doubt be surrounded by people, things and places and that they might need to think about what could help or hinder the journey that they had planned. What resources might be needed to overcome any barriers or challenges?

Significantly, this task asked participants to consider their journeys through the development of imaginary, utopian maps as diagrams for a board game - one that they were asked to name and to create the rules for, to think of who would play it and how it could be played. Here the territory - decided by a small group of participants - has a more speculative nature than the initial personalized maps.

Our interest in the potential of a critical cartographic approach for situating young people's relationship with their immediate urban context allowed for a familiar, flexible and open point of departure for the workshop's second workshop activity. Our relatively sparse and deliberately limited instructions to participants encouraged subjective and vernacular approach and the use of experiences of local landscapes to represent attachments and encouraging a sharing of stories within a group of participants who had likely never met.

The brief for the design of a board game design was meant to provide some structure and to indicate potential scenarios whilst allowing participants to develop their own ideas within the small groups. Each group (5 to 6 young people) was asked to draw a map of a real or an imagined city, or a combination of both, which would be the starting point for the development of a game.

As has been mentioned, the groups were invited to create rules for the game. The context was an imaginary or real city/place or a combination of reality and dream. They were given pointers but were encouraged throughout the project to take ownership of the project and to devise the rules, context and features within the game - it was their game, their decision how it was to be played, what the rewards or penalties would be.

The pointers were to think of pathways, roads, or other circuits that would enable circulation through the terrain of their (imagined) city. They were invited to consider how one would move or traverse the city to arrive at another location, what their destination might be and which vehicle they would use, if any, or if they would be pedestrians. The participants were invited to think about obstacles such as building sites, bad weather, carnival parades



or other things that can hinder progress. They also could consider what or who helped them on their way/path, such as a friend with a car to give them a lift, green traffic lights, a carpool, a flying carpet or other situations they might imagine. The participants were invited to draw, write, or construct elements of their game using large sheets of paper or the floor.

In view of the age of the participants which ranged from 12 to 19 years, we kept the brief as clear and straightforward as possible. The aim was not to overwhelm but to invite curiosity and creative responses to the brief. The youth were not asked to necessarily draw a map or create a game of their city but to imagine a city with pathways, obstacles, support and rewards that would help them to reach the destination – a destination they decided on as a group.

An important aspect of the second activity was that it was a group effort, allowing people to give as much or as little input as they wanted. When setting up the groups, we had to ensure that those who had arrived with guards 1 were each in a separate group – this was initially with the intention to allow for as much integration as possible and to ensure that the youth from the reformatory were not separated from the other participants (since at the beginning of the session they were keeping to themselves). It was interesting to observe how the dynamics within the groups of this activity played out and how younger and older youth interacted. At times the older youth (from the reformatory) would lead, in other groups some of the quieter younger kids seemed at the forefront of planning and drawing.

## **2.4 Possible states**

One could see a board game as a place defined by a certain order or system that has a static quality in terms of its rules and layout (designed and agreed by the team of stakeholders). This place or system involves the possibility of multiple narratives or trajectories through which new spaces are created (imaginary/economical/psychological). Within the place of the board game, spaces are generated through an array of possible actions (e.g. return to start, go to jail, go two steps backward, advance 5 steps, etc.) and related narratives (e.g. picking up cards with narratives suggesting awards or penalties).

The dimension of systems within games has been studied beyond games per se and has led to the development of Game Theory that has greatly influenced various disciplines, from economics, biology, philosophy, sociology, law and politics, as outlined by Frank Lantz (2023). These considerations go beyond the remit of this paper but are worth mentioning as to the far-reaching potential of games and how they enable experimentation and analysis of complex interrelating scenarios.

In his book *The Beauty of Games* (2023), game designer Frank Lantz explains how games relate to systems allowing for an extrapolation of how we experience the world we live in. Systems comprise “possible states” that are not evident at all times, thus involving future constellations that can arise within the given rules of a system (LANTZ, 2023, p.30).

Observing and extrapolating information from the workshop participants’ individual and collective experiences through the boardgame design, allowed for a creative and intellectual space where scenarios of how the world, their world— for the better or the worse —could be shaped, and importantly how these imagined scenarios included opportunities for change. Lantz reminds us that “Games are the aesthetic form of thinking and doing.” (LANTZ, 2023, p. 27).

Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of nomadic becoming and “holding space” within the game of Go differing from the dynamics of “the State” within the game of chess draws attention to different socio-political approaches to space.

In Go, it is a question of arraying oneself in open space, of holding space, of maintaining the possibility of springing up at any point ... The nomos of Go against the State of chess, nomos against polis ... chess codes and decodes space, whereas Go proceeds altogether differently, territorializing and deterritorializing it ... Another justice, another movement, another space-time. (DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 1988, p 353)

Deleuze and Guattari’s reflections focus on the boardgames of Go and chess as arenas for spatial politics contrasting institutionalised space (of the State) with local spaces and terrains which are not fixed but can (suddenly) appear and disappear. This take on nomadic space is indicative of the localized experience of the youth, which brings to mind nomadic existence (of the warrior), an existence that is contrasted with the State and its structures. The workshop and the design of the board games could be seen as an act of challenging the structures and rules of the State or the situations the youth might find themselves in (as being conditioned by the State). Making their own rules and imagining a ‘dream city’ is a way of challenging the status quo and finding ways of changing situations, of ‘shattering’ existing structures (of power relations, negative cycles, material and cultural deprivation).

Frank Lantz considers the reflective dimension of Go and stresses that strategic thinking “happens in conversations, in communities, within traditions”. (LANTZ, 2023, p.67) When considering the spatiality of games, De Certeau’s observation how games create spaces within a rationale of

itineraries resulting from particular 'situations' is useful when considering the impact of this project.

[...] games, which as operations are disjunctive, because they produce differentiating events, give rise to spaces where moves are proportional to situations... games formulate (and already formalize) rules organizing moves and constitute as well a memory ... of schemas of actions articulating replies with respect to circumstances. (De CERTEAU, 1988, p 22)

As participants of the workshops developed their game, they needed to think of a range of situations which they might want to incorporate. And linked to those situations, they needed to consider options how players could deal with these situations. Surprisingly (or not so surprisingly) the groups incorporated situations that were close to their own experience — some of these situations expressed restrictions (material, psychological, social), other situations expressed opportunities within ideal/imaginary or resolved scenarios.

## 2.5 Relations and stories

The visualization of space involved in the first mapping exercise, referred to daily itineraries as much as to specific places that enable dwelling, and was elucidated by the individual narratives. The latter informed the drawing of the maps, as such they preceded the physical diagrams stemming from awareness and memories of the participants' experience of their local environment and the city as a whole. Once the drawings were completed, these were explained to the group by reiterating and expanding on the narratives that had informed the drawings.

Michel de Certeau observes how itineraries and maps contribute to an engagement with space, but differentiates as to their rationale, where one focuses on a set of 'operations' and the other is a 'plane projection' of a terrain and its potential itineraries. He refers to the "relations between the itinerary (a discursive series of operations) and the map (a plane projection totalizing observations), that is between two symbolic and anthropological languages of space." (De CERTEAU, 1988, p 119) He reflects on how stories and the activities involved in these stories shape the correlation between place and space:

Stories [in relation to objects and operations or actions] ... carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places. The forms of the play are numberless ... from the putting in place of an immobile and stone-like order ... to the accelerated succession of actions that multiply spaces ... (De CERTEAU, 1988, p 118)

Relations between itineraries and the map were further considered in the second part of the workshop, which focused on the design and development of a boardgame by taking inspiration from the mapping exercise. This exercise involved a shift, its focus was on mapping out an imaginary (collective) terrain – the plane of a boardgame – with potential itineraries, obstacles and goals where relations between places and the creation of (communal and individual) space come to the forefront.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Diagrams as stories and the form of their telling

In this section, we carry out a process of critical reflection on a selection of three maps produced within the workshop's first activity. The maps included here are a sample from a total of twenty three which were produced by workshop participants — titles have been added by the authors during the analysis to differentiate them when being discussed. As we have mentioned, Drucker's (2023) model for diagrammatic writing provides the theoretical context through which the workshop participants' maps can be discussed. Building from its value as a useful theoretical framework through which a means of analysis can emerge, this methodological approach also highlights ways in which embodied, graphic mark-making demonstrates a “capacity of format to produce meaning” (DRUCKER, 2023).



FIGURA 1. Blue Pool. Fonte O autor



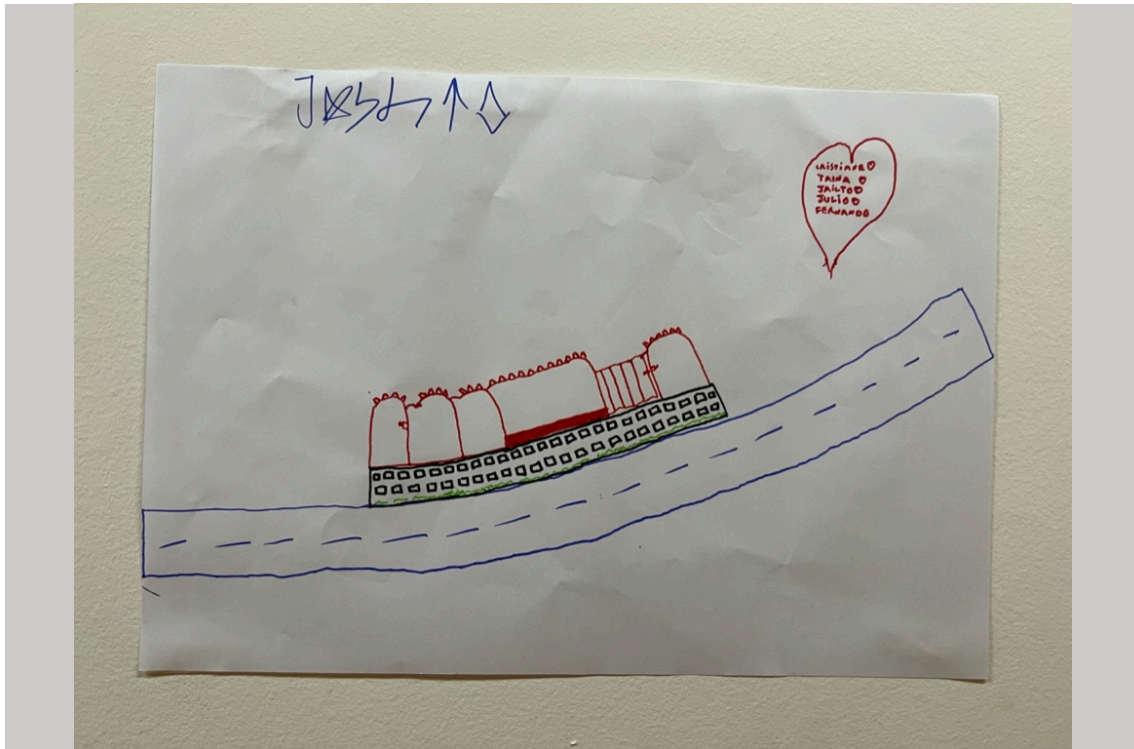


FIGURA 2. Mobile Homes. Fonte: O autor

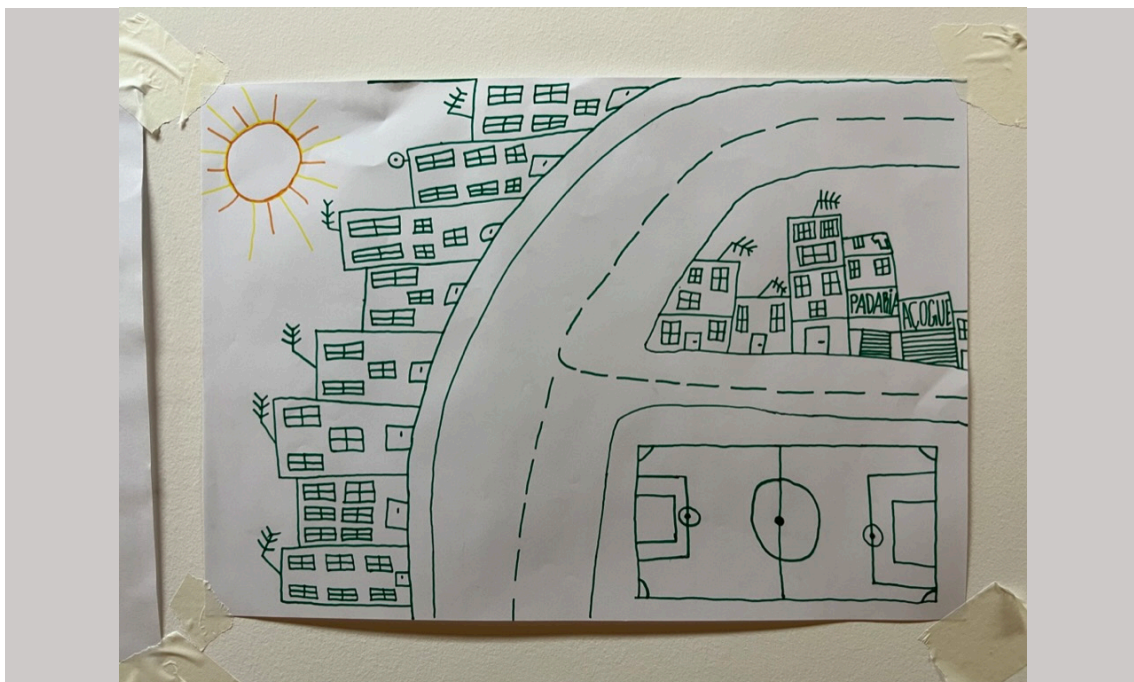


FIGURA 3. Green Roads. Fonte: O autor

The process of map-making was utilised in the workshop as a way to bring focus to the place of the city and, in particular, the participants' local

context(s): by asking for visualisations of place, and bringing awareness to how these could be represented. With the relatively low-fi approach that had been taken, particular modes of graphic and visual communication (simple diagrams, personal illustration, quick sketch etc.) were utilized as a way to explore how “landscapes are imbued with the histories and lived experiences of people.” (SLETTTO, 2009, p.445)

The practice of community mapping surfaces participants’ understanding of experience within the intertwined contexts of community and power, and of the connections between each (and each other). After the creation of individual maps, participants were invited to share their own, and to discuss them with the whole group with the creation of an impromptu ‘exhibition’ for the collection of maps on a nearby wall. We cultivated a discussion which drew comparisons between the range of maps that had been produced, and allowed for formal or informal observations to be contributed from the group.

In our discussion with participants (and in this reflection), there is a desire to consider meaning in the relationships between the range of things that have been identified and named in the process of map-making. Drawing (and writing) the maps asked participants to consider questions of themselves their sense of self within their personal context(s), and how identities are enacted through a relationship between meaningful landmarks in their neighbourhoods. This concept of ‘positionality’ produces images of space that are imbued with social memories, and present perspectives on the materialisation of social, economic and cultural experience into and through the everyday structures of life.

Following Drucker’s (2023) consideration of *placement* as a visual strategy for creating meaning through association, we can consider how the participant’s maps establish their own position as relational and determined by a complex association built between multiple components. In each of the examples included here, the arrangement of things in relation to each other (whether alongside, above, below) is clearly considered as a feature of how the maps are made. Further, the strategy of *relation* (as a way to understand meanings of certain associations) helps to consider ways in which objects were (perhaps necessarily) placed close together, often producing a kind of compression which rejected the geographical map in favour of one which embraces a potential to visualise particularly important (and meaningful) places as collections requiring particular attention.

As discussed previously, Keller Easterling discusses how such rich descriptions of urban space reveal their infrastructural disposition less as a static container or collection of passive elements and, instead, as “...actors

with agency or temperament ... (with) a quotient of aggression, submission, or exclusivity immanent in their arrangement". (EASTERLING, 2010, p.251) The intention for our participants' maps was both to document their experiences of place and also to reimagine them, revealing new constellations of imaginary infrastructural disposition. If we consider each of the maps as in some way an active form, we glimpse a range of complex interconnections: between things, buildings stacked high with patterned arrangements of windows, and of pathways or crossings between houses and other landmarks.

In some maps, buildings bend to mirror each others shapes and to accommodate the other, suggesting both a vibrant interdependence or, possibly, a fragility and immanent breakdown. Infrastructures also reveal a potential for collective progress and an upwards trajectory. Divisions marked upon the surface of urban space suggest ways in which communities separated by transport infrastructure, where the division might be experienced differently depending on one's position (one community being more neatly arranged and closer to the sun, their tv antennae reaching towards it, and another leaning away from it, with their antennae turning in the opposite direction. Participants remarked upon the ways in which roads acted to connect them to other places and people, and the maps illustrate ways in which they can also separate and become barriers which isolate or divide.

Taken together, the three maps included here each suggests a particular infrastructural disposition which shifts their focus from being sites of *encounter* towards their potential as sites of *resistance*. These concepts emerged from the SEEYouth project as ways to consider the potential for transformation that is central to any participatory research with marginalized youth. In his essay 'Rethinking Repair', Steven J. Jackson argues that repair works as a form of care, of maintenance and transformation. Further, he situates repair in relation to what he calls 'articulation work,' "...in building connections, it builds meaning and identity" (JACKSON, 2014, p.223) - which we see in how the maps were drawn and discussed. They work to visualise a sense of identity from a particular experience in and of the city, and their disposition communicates certain meaning. In our discussion of individual maps and through the group's comments on their own and each others, connections were made which articulate particular forms that transformation can take. To further understand the shift from sites of encounter to sites of resistance as an activity aiming for some kind of repair, we would suggest more of this kind of 'articulation work'. A sense of agency might emerge from plotting the trajectories suggested across the participants' maps, where the disposition of infrastructural spaces which have been visualised also suggests where power is (or should be) situated. Reading each map as active form



requires both the sense-making to consider narratives as they might appear now, but also to speculate on how new, nascent or latent potential for affect can be generated through its repair and reorganisation.

### 3.2 The Game of Survival: Boardgames as speculative terrain of socio-cultural encounters

The boardgame as socio-cultural terrain and site of opportunities, obstacles and aims can be analyzed in view of how the different groups responded to the brief. Each of the four groups developed a particular format for their game. These were:

- A football field

- A good and bad options game (floor version and table version)

- A monopoly version – with penalties and prizes

- The city of dreams game

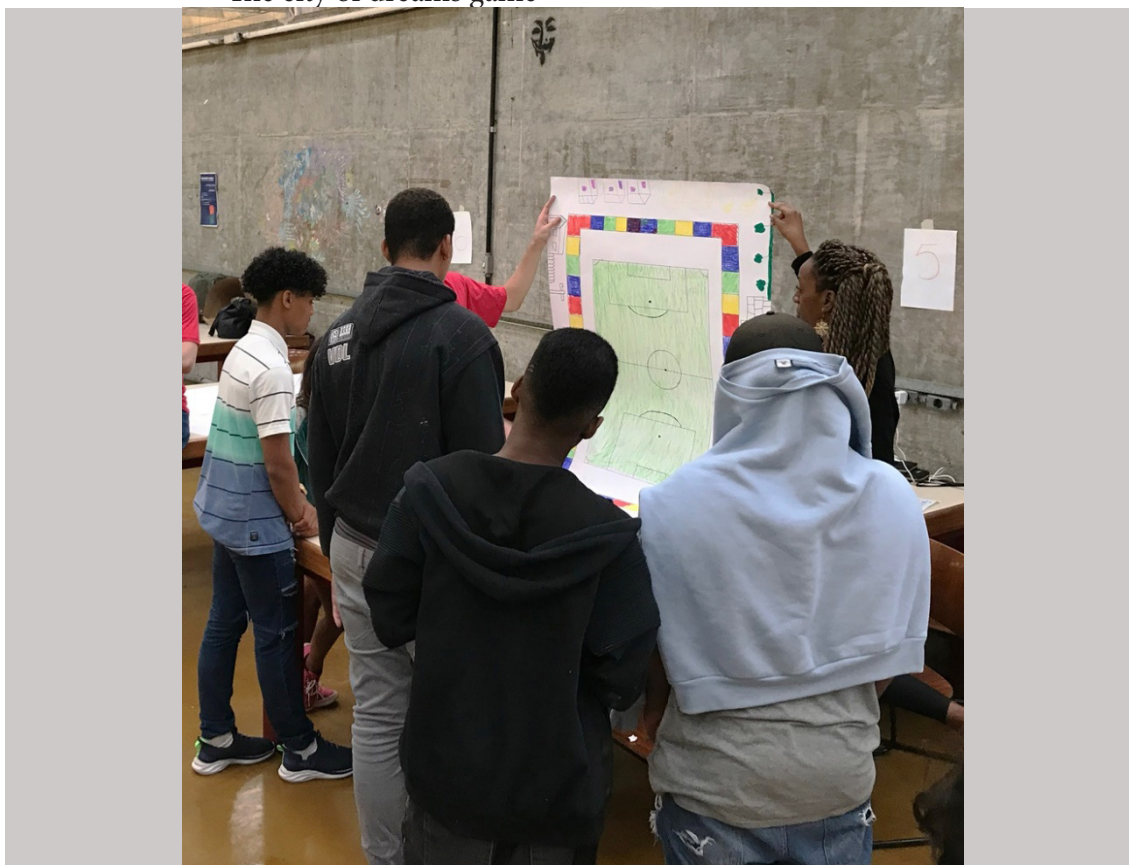


FIGURA 4. Boardgame 'A football field'. Fonte: O autor



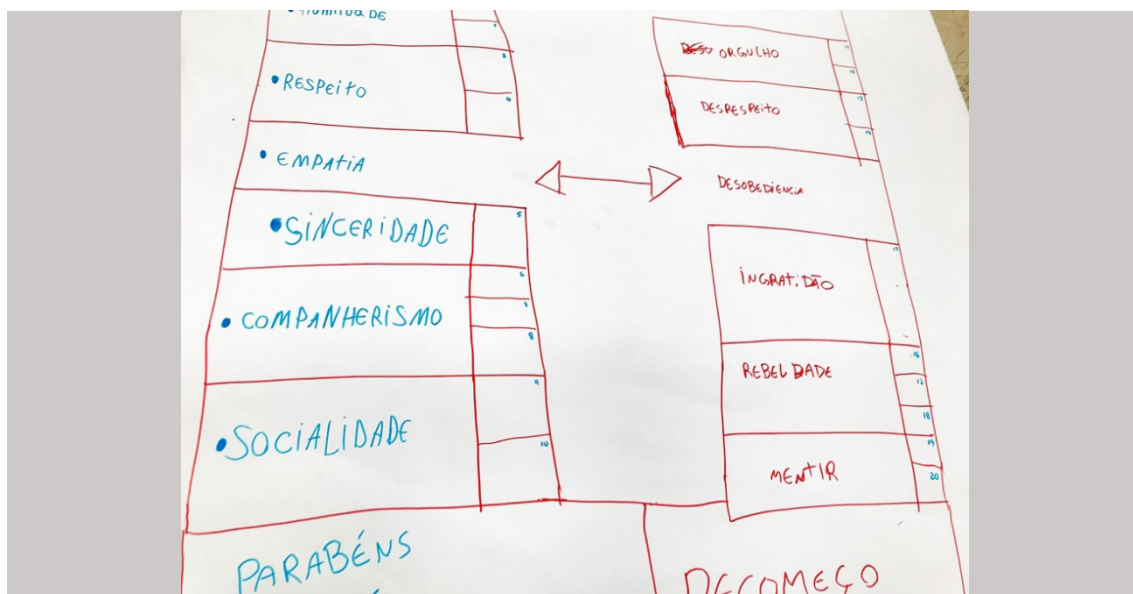


FIGURA 5. A good and bad options game. Fonte O autor.



FIGURA 6. A 'monopoly version' game. Fonte: O autor

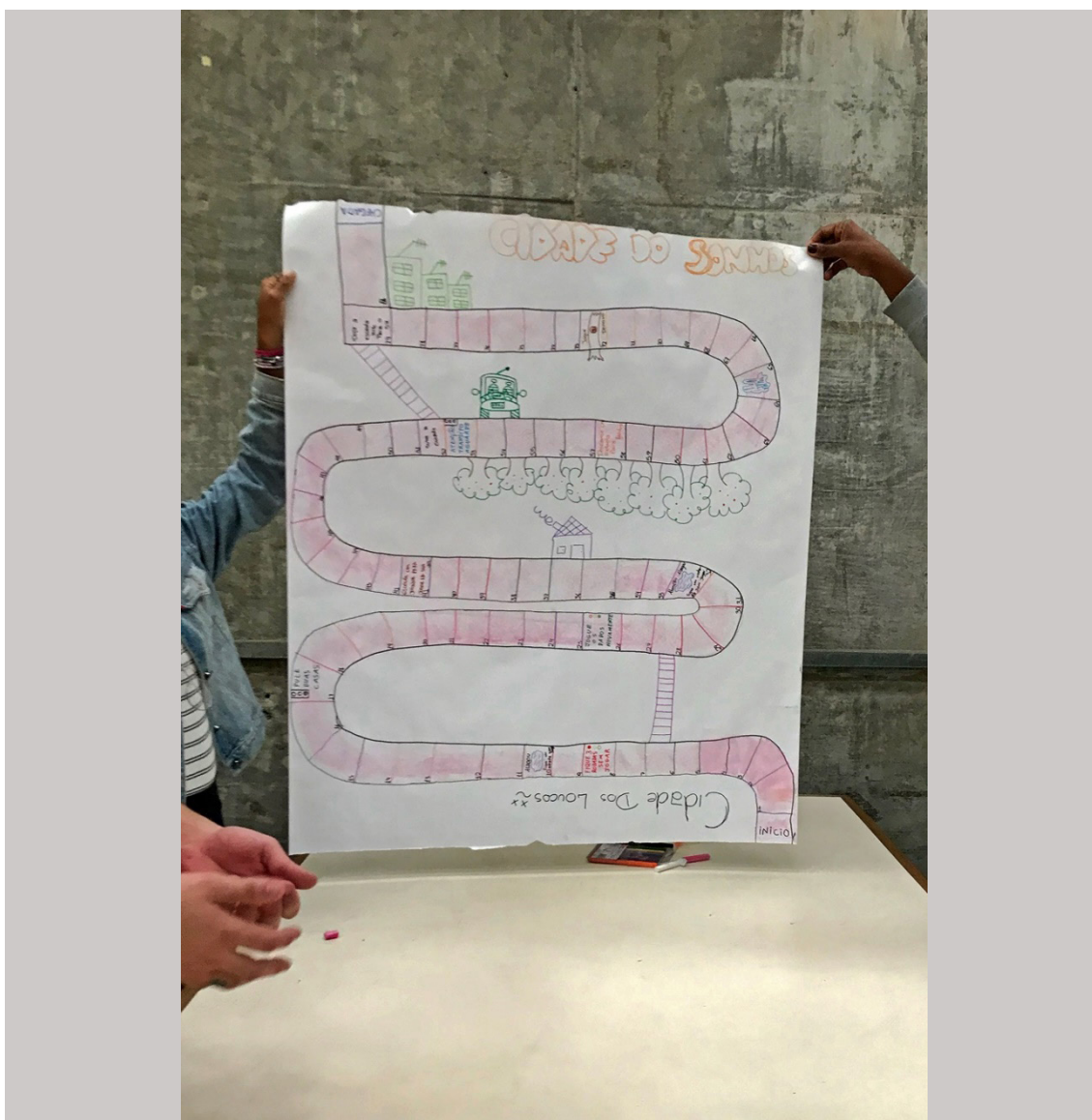


FIGURA 7. 'The city of dreams' game. Fonte: O autor.

Participants had to consider and develop a visual and textual syntax that would support the rationale of their game. They also needed to decide on rules, rewards and objectives.

Within the process of their boardgame design, the youth addressed or included aspects of their personal life with its trials and tribulations but also their aspirations and ideas how to improve particular situations. However, it is worth noting that they would address some of these issues not by directly mentioning their personal life but through extrapolation of these matters into (generalised) scenarios within the game.

Working within a small group, enabled individual youth to provide as much input as they felt comfortable to do (within the groups was the age

ranged from early to late teens; younger participants took in some instances a lead in the design and communication of their game). It also strengthened the sense of community and finding solutions together.

This takes us to the notion of agency which is an overarching concern in the SEEYouth Project which is designed to facilitate agency within groups of youth in marginalized contexts.

Within and beyond this part of the workshop, it is useful though to consider how agency<sup>3</sup> is an inherent part of games. This relates to the players involved in a game and how through play, they can experience different forms of agency, and equally, how the youth designing the games experience and anticipate agency. For C. Thi Nguyen “Game designers work in the medium of agency”. (NGUYEN, 2019, p. 423) His reflections on agency as ‘medium’ within game design and the practicalities involved are telling:

Game designers create worlds, but they also create the agencies that players will inhabit in those worlds ... games are structures of practical reason, practical action, and practical possibility conjoined with a particular world in which that practicality will operate. (NGUYEN, 2019, p.437-438)

In our case, it also relates to the process of designing a board game. By defining the spatial context or terrain, the obstacles, rewards, goals, and most importantly the rules of the game, the workshop participants needed to anticipate how future players could be involved in agency. The initial discussions within the group involved deciding the parameters of the game – its territory, the goal and various other elements of the game generating opportunities for agency. The discussions within the planning stage were quite animated, as most participants took to their task with serious dedication - others remained more in the background but also contributed in various ways.

They were just board games. They were also opportunities to create systems that reflect on real situations, which through extrapolation, and the design of a ‘simplified’ scenario enabled agency – thus suggesting obstacles can be overcome. If one was to take the game as a reflection of life, such a simplified scenario might seem problematic as it does not consider the complexities of a real-life scenario. Nguyen (2019) argues that this would be an issue if “the purpose of games was to simply model or represent parts

3 Nguyen comments in a footnote (14) on the discussion of agency in different contexts beyond human agency, e.g. machines, animals, objects, etc. – Within his discussion on agency within games, he refers to agency as “intentional action or action for a reason”. (Nguyen, 2019, p 438) The latter also applies to this article.

of life”. He suggests that one of the attractions of games is that they provide comfort through a certain simplification and clear sets of rules:

One of the greatest pleasures of games is that they offer a certain existential balm, a momentary shelter from the existential complexities of ordinary life. In a game, for once in my life, I know exactly what I am supposed to be doing. (NGUYEN, 2019, p. 456)

To further elaborate on the design of the board games in view of the questions raised by the workshops, it is useful to focus on the ‘city of dreams’ game and the ‘good and bad options’ game. The former could be seen as a reiteration of standard board games such as ‘The Game of Life’ which promotes competitive endeavors within a Western Capitalist system. As the group designed their version of the game, it became a reevaluation of a socio-political system and where the participants situated themselves. Most importantly, they named it a game of survival, thus marking a clear position as to their own situation and future aspirations. The title is a key visual and conceptual aspect of the game – through drawing-as-naming the youth created a frame of reference and claimed a territory generating meaning which offers directions for redesigning ideas of urban futures.

Another group had designed a game with good and bad choices leading to good or bad outcomes. Whilst this clearly is an oversimplification of complex life situations, it allowed the group to reflect on life choices and the possibility to change circumstances even if one had made a series of bad choices (at least at the level of the game). The speaker of the group expressed this quite clearly: It is a game and one can start again and make better choices.

“Four players, what can I say is the start, right? Then you roll the dice there, you fell for it, you can choose, you go to the good side or the bad side. That is the game of life, right? The book is open, if you continue to come to the good side, you will play, you will only gain positive things in your life.

Then you have a relapse in your life, and you get on the bad side. Then you keep going. You can come back. You keep on. If you make it to the end, on the bad side you come back again to have another chance, right? To balance your life, to stay on the good side. And whoever remains on the [good] side, well that’s perfect!” (Voice recording of workshop debrief).



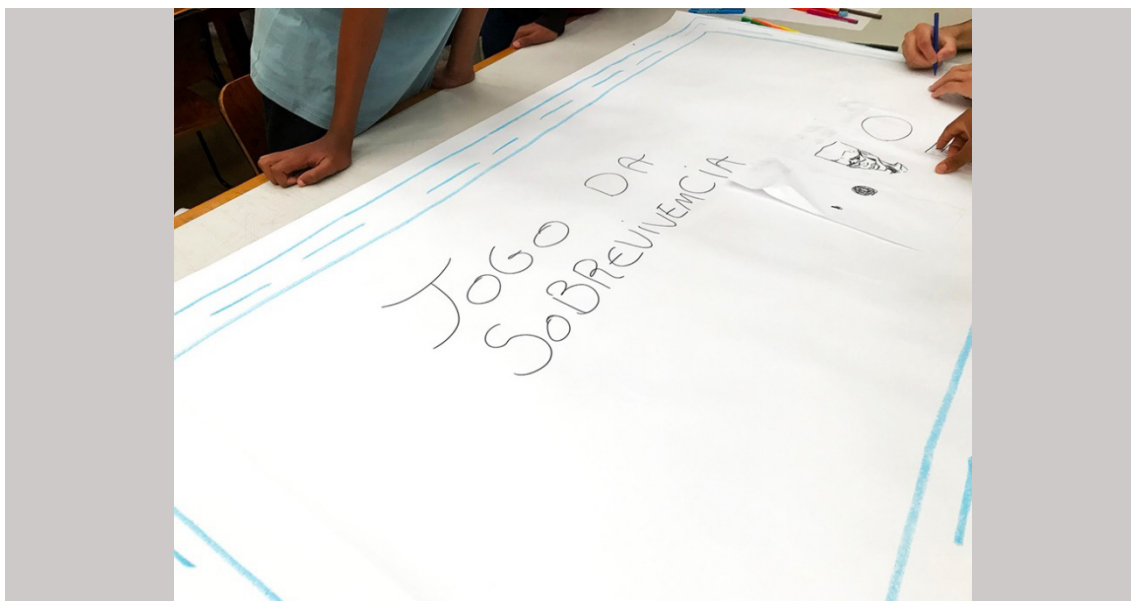


FIGURA 8. Jogo da sobrevivência / The game of Survival. Fonte: O autor

It is interesting to note that this design differed from the others as it involved an element of choice rather than relying on the chance aspect when rolling a dice. They were the only group that at first developed a version drawn directly on the floor of the premises (later transferring the design onto tabletop paper version). This created a spatiality that involved the body and its movement creating analogies with playground games such as hopscotch. Here the physical dimension of play involved a visceral, existential dimension translated as stark choices. The group struggled at some point with the logistics of the game and its limited number of options but decided that it reflected a (hopeful) scenario they wanted to put forward. As such, this game points to ideas of urban futures and considerations of breaking cycles of socio-political deprivation.

#### 4. Conclusion

Continuities are based on expectations as well as formal properties.  
No properties are absolute, no properties are essential. All is relational.  
(DRUCKER, 2023, p.4)

The research discussed in this article demonstrates the potential for participation to become transformative. In the first part of the workshop, participants had developed individual maps inspired and contextualized by their individual stories of their everyday environment and its expansion within imaginary scenarios. The second part of the workshop was motivated by a concern to engage the youth as a group and to introduce an element of

celebration and playfulness. This allowed us to expand from individual maps and stories to a communal effort of creating maps that would serve as the arena for their boardgame. We regard the experience of being together in the context of our workshop as having value (and a potential for impact) which should be considered alongside the individual outcomes of maps made or games played. Perhaps Drucker's words above suggest the power and potential of presence as relational, and as dialogue.<sup>4</sup>

Our research, therefore, sketches a model for participatory design research with young people as one which establishes an important site of encounter. We would argue that one of the most vital contributions design research can make is in promoting and enhancing such encounters as one means to address the future challenges faced by young people.

We glimpse the potential for this approach in the local landscapes of participants' lived experiences, shown through the activities of making maps and the array of visual methods (Drucker's primary moves) used by participants to bring about their representation and, as a consequence, their articulation. We also see this in the participants' exploration of boardgames as territories for speculation and their potential to exercise particular types of agency.

In our consideration of participants' maps as instances of diagrammatic writing - and when reflecting on the disposition of their infrastructure space - we can gain a deeper understanding of their characteristics as multifaceted sites of encounter — working as visualisations communicating narratives of hierarchy, agency and power which also show where they are located. From our exploration of the capacities of format, the articulation work (of repair, of resistance) can begin in earnest so that these diagrammatic stories become transformative — carriers of meaning that help to recreate landscapes in ways which recognise their potential radical reorganisation: from sites of encounter to possible sites of resistance.

There are challenges and difficulties in this type of approach which must be noted. There are limitations dictated by small groups and a limited time frame, and in how interpretation of results is now bounded by distance between ourselves and participants. It would be interesting to consider what

4 The workshop venue (the University of Sao Paulo's brutalist Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism) was also an important contributor to our participants' experience of this site of encounter as one being open, dialogic and unfixed (or informal). The building's architect João Batista Vilanova Artigas regarded it as a reflection of the Faculty's pedagogical philosophy - it has no front door, very few internal doors and so the distinction between space as something fixed (inside, outside; classroom, corridor etc.) challenges expectations of how formal (institutional) sites should perform. This would likely have been noted by our participants.

participants left out in their designs as conscious omission and to further explore difficulties in this type of approach - the need to highlight new work which considers ethical challenges and counters any implications of othering. Also, how the design of the workshop anticipates or projects particular narratives upon the work being produced. We are keen to continue in ways which address how researcher-designers can encourage a de-emphasizing of formal methods and provide 'space' for participants to challenge the rationale of the workshop and take ownership (of their project).

The judge, Iberê de Castro Dias, whose vision of creating opportunities for the young participants made the workshop possible, mentioned that activities such as the workshop can be seen as "their [the participants'] right to culture, which is a constitutional right". (DIAS, 2023)

When Andrea Thoma (one of the researchers/co-authors) interviewed him towards the end of the workshop, he said:

That is what we are doing here; We are expressing the right of culture for children. To make them first class citizens. To see an achievement. Sometimes, they do not know about their rights. Bringing them here [so that they can participate in the workshop], is a way of saying [or explaining] to them the rights they have without really saying it. (DIAS, 2023)

And, identifying a vital benefit from such demonstrations of cultural citizenship, he went on to add:

If you asked them at the beginning of the day: You are going to do a game from scratch. They would probably say, no, I am not able to do it. I am (not) capable of thinking about it ... and now they are doing exactly this activity. It shows how far they can go. And how able to do new things they are ... this is a wonderful part of ... these team activities. Yes, and they do not know each other. We can see they like to do it. They are enjoying this. (DIAS, 2023)

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