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‘There's No Way You Can Help Me if I Don't Want to be Helped’: Unpacking Successful and Sustainable Work Approaches With Street-Connected Youth and Their Families in Northeast Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Although family reintegration of street-connected youth has become the main objective of many governmental and civil society organizations, achieving this remains a complex task. This article explores what contributes to successful and sustainable change in work with street-connected young people and their families based on descriptions provided by the youth and family members themselves and the professionals who work with them. The study draws on ethnographic data created in two civil society organizations and one governmental institution in urban Northeast Brazil. The results illustrate the desired change: weakening young people's connection to the street and its related lifestyle and strengthening their family and community ties and, as a result, achieving family reintegration. In addition, they discuss work approaches that can successfully and sustainably contribute to this change: relationship-building, awareness-raising and enhancing strengths. The article argues that these approaches are fundamentally rights-based and can offer successful and sustainable change in these young people's situations and those of their families by valuing them as subjects of rights instead of stigmatizing or victimizing them. It further argues that such approaches should, therefore, be acknowledged in both practice and policy within a relational perspective that involves both young people and their families.

1 | Introduction

Miguel¹ (17): You need to give yourself an opportunity. You want to help me? There's no way you can help me if I don't want to be helped. The first step is mine. I need to decide that I want to change, no one else can tell me to.

Above, one of the participants of this study illustrates the crucial contradiction in change-oriented child protection social work: Although the child's best interest is at its core, achieving the desired change so as to guarantee children's rights—for

instance, to safety and education, to live with their family and to participate in and have an impact on decisions about their lives (Brazil 1990; United Nations 1989)—remains a complex task. The article examines this delicate issue by focusing on a particularly vulnerable group: street-connected young people,² for whom the street is a central reference point that plays a significant role in their everyday life and identity (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2012). This is done within a relational perspective, by considering how work with this group should move beyond targeting individual young people on the street and encompass their families. Furthermore, the article addresses how the discussion should go beyond *abandoned children* and towards *abandoned families*

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(also Lehtonen 2026), considering what can be done to successfully support them.

Young people's reasons for being in the street environment in Brazil, where this study is situated, are connected, for instance, to income opportunities, the need for freedom and alternative sources of affection, and drug-related issues (e.g., Lima et al. 2021; Rizzini and do Couto 2018; Santana et al. 2021) and also to financial and affective issues in their family situations (e.g., da Silva and de Avelar 2014; Rizzini and do Couto 2018; Rizzini et al. 2020). The ambivalence in these young people's family relations has been noted, with their families being characterized as spaces both of affection and security and also of uncertainties, violence and rejection (da Silva and de Avelar 2014; Gomes Rodrigues et al. 2010; Lehtonen 2021, 2023; Paludo and Koller 2008). Furthermore, the family structures often feature female-headed households and a strong sense of interdependence, with each member expected to contribute (de Lara and de Castro 2021; Lehtonen 2023; Paludo and Koller 2008; Rynänen 2011). Additionally, the concept of family reaches beyond biology to the extended family or other affective references (do Couto and Rizzini 2021; Lehtonen 2021, 2023).

These families can be described as having complex needs (e.g., Hughes and Munoz-Guzman 2016)—nevertheless, this does not imply that they are incapable of taking care of their children or that their lives are solely determined by deprivation and vulnerability. Brazilian research has long emphasized the need to acknowledge these family relationships, widely critiquing the narrative of young people being abandoned by their families (e.g., Morais, Paludo, and Koller 2010; Paludo and Koller 2008; Rizzini and do Couto 2018; Rizzini et al. 2020; Ursin and Rizzini 2021). Further, the vulnerable situations of these young people and their families are fundamentally embedded in the fact that there is insufficient practice and policy to support them, and this, rather than individual family situations, should be seen as the root cause of the street phenomenon (do Couto and Rizzini 2021; Gomes Rodrigues et al. 2010; Rizzini et al. 2020). Thus, intergenerational violations of rights within the context of extreme poverty shape these families' lived realities (also Lehtonen 2023, 2026).

Still, many governmental and civil society organizations in Brazil are working to guarantee the rights of street-connected youth and their families, common support methods being social education on the street, social work, shelters and institutional care (e.g., Brazil 2017; de Oliveira 2001; Ferreira et al. 2014; Lehtonen 2025). Despite family reintegration and its challenges being a complex discussion in social work (e.g., Frimpong-Manso et al. 2024; Martín et al. 2020; Tucker et al. 2025), in the context of street-connected young people both in Brazil and worldwide, it has long been suggested as the most desirable outcome in situations where it aligns with the child's best interest (do Couto and Rizzini 2021; Ferreira et al. 2014; Marrengula 2010; Santana et al. 2004; Schwinger 2007; Volpi 2002). Zewude et al. (2023) define reintegration as the stage in the trajectory of vulnerable children and youth when they leave institutional care or the streets to return to their communities.

It is important to investigate factors that contribute to the effectiveness of reintegration and practices that genuinely

involve street-connected young people's families (D'Aroz 2022; do Couto and Rizzini 2021; Zewude et al. 2023). This is supported by the fact that family-focused work methods, coupled with the objective of reintegration, are fundamentally connected to children and young people's right to live with their families and communities, as addressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) and the Brazilian Child and Adolescent Statute (Brazil 1990). Although challenges in family reintegration are acknowledged, such as the risk of young people returning to abusive situations or a lack of subsequent support for the family, it is important to explore which work approaches can remove or lessen these challenges. This study aims to contribute to the understanding that young people and their families living in extremely vulnerable situations also deserve support that acknowledges and encourages their participation and strengths. Therefore, this article explores what contributes to successful and sustainable change in work with street-connected young people and their families based on descriptions provided by the youth and family members themselves and the professionals who work with them. The study seeks to participate in this discussion with a data-driven analysis of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Recife and Salvador, Brazil, from 2018 to 2023.

2 | What Is Considered 'Good Practice' With Street-Connected Youth and Their Families?

Street-connected young people and their families in Brazil have received a variety of attention in practice and policy, ranging from authoritarian institutional approaches and assistentialism to strengths-based approaches aimed at improving their well-being and participation (e.g., Ferreira et al. 2014; Firme and Stone 2017; Santana et al. 2004; Schwinger 2007; Volpi 2002). Assistentialism in social work refers to paternalistic, charitable and individualized practice and policy and is generally differentiated from rights-based approaches (Miquel et al. 2024; Pessoa 2026). Volpi (2002) addresses how increasing young people's aid-dependency can reduce the incentive for them to leave the street and even make their situations worse; rather, work should aim to help individuals strengthen their family and community connections.

Relationship-building, participation and the genuine involvement of young people are oft-mentioned factors that can contribute to successful and sustainable change. These principles are embedded in the practices of various Brazilian organizations working with street-connected youth, particularly in their outreach street education, as they have been strongly influenced by Paulo Freire's change-oriented theoretical approach (Brazil 2017; Firme and Stone 2017; Freire 2005). Freire's educational legacy entails encouraging consciousness among youth about their situations and about potential different ways of existing and, thus, building their citizenship (de Oliveira 2001; Freire 2005; Paiva 2021; Rynänen 2011). To enable successful and long-lasting outcomes, young people deserve to be considered subjects of their own development, and, therefore, support methods should be designed in accordance with their aspirations and also support them to develop their own strategies for leaving the street (van Blerk 2012; Volpi 2002).

Nevertheless, work should go beyond the young people themselves, as it is widely noted that good practices also involve their families. As outlined in the previous section, the general desired outcome across the different support methods is family reintegration. To understand how to achieve this objective successfully and sustainably, it is important to discuss what can hinder or support it. A widely acknowledged challenge both in Brazil and worldwide is that even if young people are provided with support aimed at loosening their street bond, many of them return to the street even after periods in institutional care or after being reintegrated with their family (e.g., Butler 2009; do Couto and Rizzini 2021; Volpi 2002). Whereas hasty institutionalization can lead to young people escaping back to the street, hasty reintegration can have the same effect, or the young people might end up in violent family situations where the reasons they left for the street in the first place have not been addressed (Zewude et al. 2023). Do Couto and Rizzini (2021) consider the key challenge of institutional care not maintaining and strengthening family ties, even though it is intended to be exceptional and temporary, with many institutions failing to instigate regular contact with family members. Additionally, the inability to deal with challenges within families, such as low income, violence, abuse or substance addiction, will affect reintegration efforts (Zewude et al. 2023).

In contrast, successful and sustainable family reintegration requires a holistic approach, involving an in-depth assessment of the young person's individual situation and of the circumstances in their immediate family environment and wider ecological setting (Zewude et al. 2023). It is crucial to identify their family members, the reasons that led to their not being in their family environment, the possibilities for rebuilding ties and the characteristics and demands of each family (do Couto and Rizzini 2021; Gomes Rodrigues et al. 2010). Effective reintegration requires building dialogical, cooperative relationships and the participation of young people, families and others involved in the process (do Couto and Rizzini 2021; Gomes Rodrigues et al. 2010; Zewude et al. 2023). Also, it is important to explore both the family's desire and capability to receive and protect their child and the young person's own wish, or otherwise, to return (Volpi 2002; Zewude et al. 2023). Thus, reintegration is a delicate, gradual progress requiring conflict resolution, confidence-building, counselling for the whole family and sometimes also financial help (Volpi 2002). A key principle in successful and sustainable work is to enable these young people and their families to become aware of their problems and the possible solutions, strengthen their internal resources and become active protagonists in their own lives (Gomes Rodrigues et al. 2010; Morais, Morais, et al. 2010; Schwinger 2007).

In sum, comprehensive support for the whole family is widely noted in research, with various scholars emphasizing the importance of genuine participation, protagonism and empowerment, embedded in a multilayered, holistic approach. In line with this body of literature, this study seeks to identify and discuss work approaches that can contribute to successful and sustainable change in these young people's situations and those of their families.

3 | Data and Methods

This study's ethnographic data were created in two Brazilian cities, Recife and Salvador, in collaboration with three

organizations: Juntos, Desejo and Casa. The data were generated during a total of 12 months across three fieldwork periods between 2018 and 2023. Juntos in Recife and Desejo in Salvador are civil society organizations, and their work methods include various socioeducational activities and outreach street education with young people, countryside trips (Juntos) and social work with families, including home visits, conflict mediation, signposting to other services and monthly meetings. Both organizations' aim is to reinforce citizenship by respecting the young people's autonomy and building trust, as well as strengthening their family and community coexistence. Even those work methods that seemingly did not directly involve families, such as outreach street education, still often had the objective of working towards family reintegration. The work of both Juntos and Desejo is influenced by Freirean socioeducational theory.³ Casa in Salvador is a governmental residential care institution for boys aged 15–17, most of whom have received death threats related to drug trafficking. The institution is intended to be a short-term placement, and its objective is to work with the boys and their families to find a safe and suitable solution to their situation, preferably through reintegration with someone in the family network. These organizations employed coordinators, social workers and social educators, and in Casa, there was also a nurse and a psychologist.

The participants were 15 young people—10 boys and 5 girls—aged between 10 and 17, three family members—two mothers and one grandmother—and six professionals working with them—three social workers and three coordinators. All these young people and family members had grown up in disadvantaged urban communities—*favelas*—and had current or former street connections. In relation to the meanings that the young participants gave to family and home (also Lehtonen 2021, 2023, 2026), only one of them said he lived on the street. The boys in Casa referred to an often extended family member's house as their home, despite their living in residential care at the time. All other young participants said they lived with their family members, with most heads of household being a mother, grandmother or aunt. With some individuals who were relatively new to the organizations, details regarding their family situations were still uncertain, as it often took a long time for civil society organizations to obtain these. Most young participants navigated between their family home, the street and other settings (see Lehtonen 2025). Some spent many nights on the street, some mostly slept in their family homes and some were on the street mainly during the day.

The data-collection methods used were participant observation, interviews⁴ and other activities such as drawing exercises. Participant observation was aligned with the organizations' activities, through which I aimed to comprehensively understand their day-to-day dynamics and build rapport with the participants. For the interviews, I employed a semistructured guide and then improvised depending on what the participants wanted to talk about. The staff interviews mainly focused on what they viewed as important in their work, and the professional areas they talked about most were social work and social education. The social workers' and educators' jobs partly overlapped, as they all pursued a holistic understanding of the situations, hopes, resources and challenges of these young people and their families. With the latter, the interviews were more flexible,

focusing on what they wanted to share about their lives. The questions regarding the work that was carried out with them included, for instance, asking what had helped, or could help, them or their family's situation or what they thought could help others in similar situations.

Ethical statements for the study were granted by the Ethics Committees of the Tampere Region in Finland, the Federal University of Pernambuco in Brazil and the Brazilian Health Ministry. The main ethical considerations, particularly where the young people were concerned, included having sensitive conversations, negotiating informed consent and maintaining confidentiality. With the professionals and family members, informed consent was obtained both verbally and in written form. With the young people, it was negotiated verbally and renegotiated on different occasions, together with the organizations' staff, to ensure that the young people knew what they would be taking part in. I recorded the interviews if the participants agreed; others were detailed in my field diary.

The data were analysed following the three stages of inductive content analysis: reducing, clustering and abstracting (Miles and Huberman 1994). After reducing the data into general aspects regarding work with these young people and their families, I continued clustering it, based, first, on what the professionals expressed as being most important in their work. In interviews, when they were asked about this, they rarely referred to concrete work practices. Rather, they emphasized more abstract, value-based approaches, such as relationship-building, respect, awareness-raising, dialogue, empowerment and defending rights. Therefore, I continued by abstracting the data to important work approaches by following these data-driven concepts. Second, when analysing the data generated by young people and their family members, the themes mainly corresponded to the professionals' views. For instance, they talked about staff members they liked and could trust, practices that had helped them and how they wanted to be involved in and make decisions about their own lives. Hence, in order to answer the research question, the whole dataset is used in this article to achieve a more thorough, holistic understanding based on different participants' views.

This article explores what contributes to successful and sustainable change in work with street-connected young people and their families based on descriptions provided by the youth and family members themselves and the professionals who work with them. The results identify, first, the *desired change* in these young people's and their families' situations and, second, work approaches that can contribute to this change: (i) *relationship-building*, (ii) *awareness-raising* and (iii) *enhancing strengths*.

4 | Approaching the Desired Change—'I've Been on the Street Less and at Home More'

When discussing what contributes to successful and sustainable change here, it is relevant to first understand what the participants actually viewed as desired change. As what they expressed corresponds to the findings of various studies presented above that emphasize family reintegration, this section clarifies further what this can entail in the young people's day

to day. Less time on the street, strengthened family ties and family reintegration were widely noted as the desired outcome in most situations, despite the challenges in this process. In the professionals' and family members' descriptions, this general objective was mentioned frequently and explicitly, whereas the professionals also emphasized assessment of the individual's best interest. Among the young people, the most common desires were to have better relationships with at least some of their family members, to stay at home with their family more and be on the street less, to stop using drugs and to go to school. These descriptions, however, were more common among those who had been on the street and participating in the organizations' activities for a long time; more appealing aspects of street life, such as freedom and the importance of the relationships it provided, were expressed by those who were relatively new to the street (also Lehtonen 2025).

A general principle employed by the organizations was that a young person cannot be comprehensively helped without their family being included in the process. In addition to getting to know the immediate family unit, the professionals talked about the objective being to make sense of the young person's wider social network—other relatives, neighbours and godparents—and to acknowledge the whole network as a potential source of support. For instance, for 17-year-old Paulo, the right option was to live with his grandmother, and he explained one of the reasons for this: 'If I go to my mum's place I'll get together with my friends, but one of them is a drug dealer'. Similarly, Desejo coordinator reflected on the need to acknowledge these wider networks—this was supported by the fact that, sometimes, it was impossible to work towards reintegration into the same family unit that the young person had left:

Sometimes we find a young person on the street who was suffering at home, and home is no longer a possibility. Therefore, we'll think about family reintegration in some way, another family structure, so that they can be in the world.

In finding the best way to help each individual and their family, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. As 17-year-old Miguel stated, 'each case is unique'; he described how some young people need to stay in institutional care due to death threats and others because of very conflicted family situations. Still, the participants mentioned many success stories. For instance, although 17-year-old Larissa, who had participated in Juntos activities for several years, had previously been on the street more, her family bond had since strengthened. Still, this extract from her demonstrates the slow, complex process of family reintegration:

I've been on the street less and at home more. Because my mum wanted me to come back. I don't want to sleep on the street anymore, it's dangerous. I'm there for the day, sniff glue, then I come home by nine.

My mum likes it when I come here [to the countryside]. It helps me to stay at home more and on the street less, and to use less glue. My mum is thankful for the support of Juntos.

For some young people, like Larissa, family reintegration was accomplished in the sense that they were spending less time on the street and more at home, were using fewer drugs and/or had gone back to school. Some expressed how they sought to distance themselves from street life due, for instance, to violence and drugs, and how staying closer to their family enabled them to achieve their dreams. Still, even if the family bond had strengthened, the young people sometimes returned to alternating between spending more time on the street and going back home—a mobile dynamic frequently noted in research worldwide (e.g., Lehtonen 2025; Lima et al. 2021; Ungruhe 2019; van Blerk 2005). Thus, family reintegration should not be considered an exclusively static condition; rather, it can refer to a strengthened tie with family and community—a continuous, nonlinear process (also Lehtonen 2021). Although young people's street bond is difficult to break completely, alternatives, such as a safe home environment, leisure activities and school, should be strengthened. The Juntos coordinator expressed how this desired change is fundamentally connected to their rights:

We often encounter families, mothers, who no longer have any hope that their child will come back. And when we manage to reestablish this bond, we have testimonies from mothers who are eternally grateful: 'Thanks to Juntos, my life has changed. I was reunited with my child after many years'.

This perspective can make a great difference in these young people's lives. That they can stay home, have strengthened family ties. And through that they can access other rights, to school, to play, to family and community coexistence. So the street becomes a space for visiting, not a space for living.

Although the objective of family reintegration was valued and was constantly mentioned in these organizations' day-to-day work, it had its challenges, and the professionals were aware that strengthening family ties, especially with the family unit that had been left, was not always in the young person's best interest. To overcome this challenge, it was crucial to employ approaches that enabled an assessment of how best to secure young people's needs and rights and/or reduce harm in their situations. Despite these evident challenges, this article focuses on 'what works': Because family reintegration—as the continuous, nonlinear process mentioned above—is the desired outcome in most situations, it is necessary to investigate which work approaches can successfully and sustainably contribute to this objective in a way that involves young people and their families in the process.

5 | Unpacking Successful and Sustainable Work Approaches

5.1 | Relationship-Building—'When You Care, Everything Flows'

Relationship-building was frequently expressed as one of the most important foundations of this work. The first contact with young people in Juntos and Desejo is usually outreach

street work, with educators locating and often starting to frequently interact with the youth. In Desejo, the process of building relationships with young people was defined as *pedagogy of hope*, whereas in Juntos, it was called *sensibilization* (also Lehtonen 2021, 2023). Involvement cannot be forced, and true change in these young people's and their families' situations can begin only when the foundation for trusting relationships has been built. This was emphasized as a key principle by the Desejo coordinator:

Patience. Respecting the individual's timing, to not be in a rush. Listen, observe, to know how to build a relationship. Treating young people as subjects of rights, not victimising or criminalising them.

The principle of patience was also visible in this extract from my field diary (Recife, 10/2019):

During the drive back from the countryside [an educator] had the standard discussion with the young people: where to drop them off. He tried asking if it would be alright to drop them home. All eight young people declined – they insisted on staying on the street. And, just like that, they went back to the street, carrying pieces of the cake they had so proudly made the night before, with the aim of getting their next bottle of glue and going back to their usual spot.

As the above extract illustrates, it is not possible to merely take a young person from the street and drive them home. If the groundwork has not been done, there is a good chance they will simply go back. Still, even though these situations are part of the process, the desired expectation is that, through the building of a trusting relationship, at some point, the young people are ready. An oft-mentioned requirement for sustainable change was to gain access to the families; once the professionals got to know an individual, they tried to find out more about their family situation. However, *achievement* (*conquista*) was a word that came up frequently; it truly is an achievement to first build enough trust for the young people to begin to share information about their family situations, let alone gain permission to meet their family members. One example of this was 13-year-old Maria, one of the eight young people mentioned in the extract above; after months of educators discussing the idea with her and then asking to visit her mother, she finally agreed. This dynamic supports the need for long-term work, as it can sometimes take years for a young person to agree to disclose anything about their family (also Volpi 2002).

Once the family members have been located, relationship building with them is crucial, and this was also a guiding principle for the social workers, as the Juntos coordinator emphasized:

It's a process of care; from the first meeting, to get to know this family better. The socio-economic context this family is living in. It's a continuous process to get to know and understand their life history.

On one occasion, during a street education session in Salvador, we met a mother with whom the Desejo educators had worked for a long time. She told us how she felt the educators worked from the heart—‘When you care, everything flows’. Such appreciation was also expressed by other young people’s family members, such as Dona Cristina, 10-year-old Jenifer’s grandmother: ‘Everybody loves Jenifer. I’m grateful that the professionals here care, it’s important that Jenifer comes here [to Desejo]’. Trust, patience and genuine care for young people and their families were expressed as fundamental factors in relationship building. Once this relationship-based groundwork has been established, it is possible to start working together towards change.

5.2 | Awareness-raising—‘Building Bridges Between Their Reality and Their Dreams’

The previous section illustrated the difficult and slow, but also rewarding, process of relationship-building. A good relationship is a prerequisite for another important approach that is ever-present in the organizations’ day-to-day work: awareness-raising. This involves discovering what can serve the best interest of each young person and what they and their family want and need and also raising their awareness of their situation. As one Juntos educator stated, the objective is to ‘build bridges between their reality and their dreams’. Ideally, change is not defined top-down by the professionals. Rather, they aim to discover what these young people and their families want through dialogue. For instance, the Desejo coordinator said that in situations where the young people decide to run away from home or institutional care, the professionals should be curious about what this tells them: what is happening in their lives, why do they move in this way and what can be done to shift this movement from the street towards, in most cases, their family?

Doesn’t it seem violent? If someone is in a situation, and we decide to take them because of what we think is best for them. It’s best for them to understand that the situation where they are is not good for them. Then they decide to do other things and we’re there to make that available.

There needs to be a dialogue with the young person; hey, you’re here for a while, then we’ll construct another reality with your family. If not with your mum, your dad. Or with other people in your family. We need to create an atmosphere of awareness-raising.

This slow process of awareness-raising was also summarized by the Casa coordinator: ‘The professionals can try to do everything, but if the young person doesn’t want to, there’s no way’. All these extracts demonstrate the frequently expressed fundamentals: the importance of dialogue and of acknowledging the young people’s protagonism in achieving sustainable change. Working towards genuine participation is also noted by Volpi (2002), who addresses how sustainable results cannot be achieved solely by forcing young people to do what adults want (also Morais, Morais, et al. 2010).

The process of awareness-raising was present in work with both young people and their family members. Ten-year-old Jenifer, mentioned in the previous section, had recently spent the night on the street, and both her grandmother, Dona Cristina, and Desejo staff went to look for her. When the educators finally found her, Cristina said, ‘I’ll be tough with her, I hope the educators will be too’. Cristina was not abnegating her responsibility for Jenifer—quite the opposite—but she, too, needed support. Care, awareness-raising and ‘tough love’ were present in the relationships between Jenifer, Cristina and the workers. The professionals involved were trying to raise Cristina’s awareness of Jenifer’s situation. One of the educators said, ‘She escapes. She’s in charge of her own life, we need to empower her, we cannot do it for her’. Similarly, the following extract from a Juntos social worker demonstrates the value of dialogue and awareness-raising as a prerequisite for families’ protagonism—working with them, not for them:

Our work is about reflection and action. We reflect, do it together with her [a mother]. Afterwards, let her do it. Then we reflect on how it went. We often say, ‘You can do it!’

This extract also aligns with how Gomes Rodrigues et al. (2010) describe work with families—a reflective process of action and change. Thus, Jenifer and Cristina’s situation, as well as the Juntos social worker’s explanation, illustrate how awareness-raising is crucial; however, successful and sustainable change cannot be accomplished without first strengthening these families. Even if the young people and their families became aware of their hopes and needs and worked towards an alternative life situation, they would need to build on their strengths with which to do so.

5.3 | Enhancing strengths—‘Whenever I Come Here Sad, I Leave Happy’

Relationship-building, awareness-raising, and enhancing strengths are interconnected approaches in the organizations’ day-to-day. For instance, the daily socioeducational activities, such as gardening, photography, playing football and learning to cook, can serve, first, to keep the young people wanting to return to the organizations. Second, these activities enable relationships to be built with the young people while working towards raising awareness of their life situations through dialogue. Third, they can offer a sense of joy and self-capacity, helping to build resources and confidence and to learn skills that will be useful later in life (also Harris et al. 2011). Through this process, the professionals can work with the young people to shift their mindset towards alternatives to the street environment—and preferably towards their families. This extract from my field diary (Recife, 10/2019) demonstrates how the approach of enhancing strengths was ideally directed at both the young people and their families within seemingly small mundane activities:

We were doing arts and crafts in the countryside. [An educator] asked what Larissa would think if we made a ceramic vase for her mother to sell. The educator asked if Larissa’s mother would use the money to buy

drugs. 'No, she'd use it to help the family', Larissa said. She thought it would be good to make something to help the family financially.

Additionally, understanding family dynamics was constantly noted as a foundation for increasing the families' internal resources. This extract from the Desejo coordinator demonstrates the interconnected holistic nature of these approaches and the importance of establishing a foundation of relationship-building and awareness-raising so as to strengthen the families:

It's important for us to understand the whole picture, the relationships, to empower the family. To understand how the mother relates to her child. How the family contributes to maintaining it [the family unit], what role each person has. This perspective is important in strengthening these families.

Similarly, the Juntos coordinator talked about the importance of acknowledging and valuing family members and offering them psychosocial support, through which they can work towards empowering themselves:

We need to see this mother, grandmother, aunt, godmother – as most of them are women – who's there, holding on, to provide for and take care of the family. To see this woman as a survivor, enable her to look at herself, her pain, and empower herself. That this family feels they can count on us, that we're not just another person who comes to judge them. But we come to offer support and say that she's not alone.

This support was greatly appreciated by the family members participating in Juntos family meetings. When I talked with the mothers who attended, one of them expressed that 'family meetings are moments to have fun and distract myself', and another said, 'whenever I come here sad, I leave happy'. In addition to psychosocial support, according to the Juntos coordinator, supporting these mothers to gain financial autonomy was also crucial, as it enabled them to break the cycle of violence, including dependence on abusive partners and/or earning income in precarious ways: 'We need to bring these women other possibilities, starting from what they can do: arts and crafts, cooking, based on their capabilities'. This approach is in line with do Couto and Rizzini's (2021) notion that if these families' vulnerable situations are not addressed and supported, sustainable change will be difficult.

This section has illustrated how strengthening these young people and their families includes both psychosocial and financial elements and how genuine protagonism and participation are crucial. The approach of enhancing strengths entails supporting young people and their families in their day-to-day by, for instance, mediating conflicts, increasing self-esteem, making them feel they are not alone and supporting their financial autonomy. In conclusion, an oft-mentioned principle across the relationship-building, awareness-raising, and enhancing strengths approaches was that young people cannot be

comprehensively helped without support for the whole family. Further, all three approaches are tied into a wider rights-based approach, as the professionals aimed to ensure that these young people and their families knew their rights and felt included in society, as the following extracts summarize:

If you stop and listen to their story, you'll see that these mothers carry a whole history of violated rights.
– Juntos coordinator

Principally this work is about constructing the emancipation of a class. Or if not the whole class, at least one individual.
– Desejo coordinator

6 | Concluding Discussion

This article has investigated what contributes to successful and sustainable change in work with street-connected young people and their families based on descriptions provided by the youth and family members themselves and the professionals who work with them. The expressed general desired change included weakening young people's connection to the street and its related lifestyle, along with family reintegration. Nevertheless, family reintegration in this context can be understood within a nexus: The intention is to slowly strengthen family and community ties together with the youth and their families, instead of instantly expecting a permanent state in which the young people never return to the street. The results illustrate the work approaches that can successfully and sustainably contribute to this change: relationship-building, awareness-raising and enhancing strengths. They also indicate that these approaches should be included within a multilayered understanding wherein young people and their families have—ideally—the resources and capabilities to act consciously towards change in their lives. Thus, *success* and *sustainability* refer to a relatively long-lasting change achieved through ethically sound practice that values both rights and protagonism. This article has made visible the often implicit, embedded approaches used with street-connected youth and their families that can offer a more comprehensive and holistic way to respond to their situations.

The approaches presented here correspond to the change-oriented Freirean legacy in social education that emphasizes young people's protagonism and capacities (e.g., de Oliveira 2001; Firme and Stone 2017; Freire 2005; Paiva 2021), along with wider contemporary social work orientations emphasizing relationship-based and strengths-based approaches (e.g., Adams 2003; Kam 2021; O'Sullivan 2010; Ruch et al. 2018). Nevertheless, people living in the most vulnerable situations, such as street-connected youth and their families, have historically been, and to some extent still are, the recipients of authoritarian or assistentialist approaches (e.g., Ferreira et al. 2014; Santana et al. 2004; Schwinger 2007; Volpi 2002). These approaches do not do enough and can even prevent the achievement of the desired change. The results of this study are in line with the understanding that rights-based approaches can motivate these individuals to strengthen connections with their families, communities and society, whereas mere assistance can create aid-dependency (also Schwinger 2007;

Volpi 2002). Furthermore, the results are in line with Morais, Morais, et al.'s (2010) and Volpi's (2002) findings on how young people cannot be forced to leave the street and professionals should acknowledge their right to stay there if they wish; hence the results are, to some extent, contrary to the protectionist ideals of child protection (see, e.g., Kedell 2023; Salomäki 2025). This understanding does not deny the adversities of street life but, rather, emphasizes that successful and sustainable change can be achieved by genuinely involving young people and their families in the process.

Thus, the relationship-building, awareness-raising and enhancing strengths approaches seem to fit more organically in civil society organization contexts, where participation is optional and the staff do not have the same kind of position of authority as some governmental organization staff have—or are assumed to have. Still, these approaches can be useful in other contexts with young people and their families living in vulnerable situations, beyond solely those of civil society organizations or street-connected youth. Although the general desired outcome expressed by the participants in this study was family reintegration, this does not mean that interventions should always pursue this without critically assessing the situations that the young people return to, along with an exploration of the most suitable family members or other affective references (also do Couto and Rizzini 2021; Lehtonen 2021; van Blerk 2012; Zewude et al. 2023). As such an assessment tends to be challenging, the approaches presented here enable it to be carried out without relying on hasty decisions. This article argues that the relationship-building, awareness-raising and enhancing strengths approaches are crucial in truly understanding family dynamics, alternatives and best interest for each young person—whether this be family reintegration or, for instance, foster care. Although grounded in work with this specific group, the insights are broadly applicable across social work and social education, even—and especially—with young people and families living in extremely vulnerable situations.

This study did not include young people with no organizational contact; most, though not all, of them had been participating in the organizations' work for a long time and, therefore, were both more likely to talk with me and may have had better (family) situations compared with some of their street-connected peers. This approach to participant recruitment influenced the results and points to the need for further research to understand the desired change in relation to young people with no organizational connection. The focus of this article has not been to provide a comprehensive analysis of current practices and policies in Brazil but rather to shed light on participants' perceptions, thus contributing to bottom-up knowledge in developing practice and policy. The implications of the study are in line with those of various other studies emphasizing the importance of family-focused practice and policy, along with family reintegration, in work with street-connected youth (e.g., do Couto and Rizzini 2021; Ferreira et al. 2014; Harris et al. 2011; Marrengula 2010; Paludo and Koller 2008; Schwinger 2007; Volpi 2002). The approaches presented here are supported by the fact that family reintegration is a long and delicate process and, therefore, long-term practice should be supported as being crucial to building rapport with these individuals and their families (also Volpi 2002). Also, follow-up and ongoing work is required, as these families often

continue to need support to ensure that the situation can change sustainably and the young person—or their siblings—does not go back to the street environment or end up reintegrated into an abusive family situation.

Also, the understanding of rights violations should go beyond the young people to also encompass their families. There is a need for greater investment in supporting families and communities to strengthen their ability to receive, take care of and protect their young members (also do Couto and Rizzini 2021; Gomes Rodrigues et al. 2010; Volpi 2002). Additionally, although aid that positions families in a passive role was criticized by the participating professionals, the situations of extreme vulnerability were strongly emphasized (also do Couto and Rizzini 2021; Zewude et al. 2023). Thus, tailor-made support and prioritized attention from the protection network are highly recommended (also do Couto and Rizzini 2021; Gomes Rodrigues et al. 2010; Volpi 2002; Zewude et al. 2023). To conclude, the approaches presented here are fundamentally rights-based and can lead to successful and sustainable change in the situations of street-connected young people and their families, valuing them as subjects of rights instead of stigmatizing or victimizing them. These approaches should, thus, be acknowledged in related practice and policy within a relational perspective that involves both young people and their families.

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Ethics Statement

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

¹ The names of all participants, organizations and locations mentioned are pseudonyms.

² Street-connected *youth* and *young people* are the terms used in this article instead of *children*, as most of the participants are over the age of 13.

³ Both organisations also employed wider political-pedagogical practices, such as organizing demonstrations with community members and political articulation within the protection network, in line with

Freire's broader heritage regarding collective and revolutionary social change. Although this structural change-oriented approach is embedded in all their work, the article focuses on their grassroots work with youth and their families.

⁴The interviews were transcribed and translated by the author.

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