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Mellon Foundation Area and International Studies Fellowship

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In the summer of 2016, I used the Mellon Fellowship to fund a two-month trip to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil where I conducted research on public education in the city's favelas (low income settlements). I worked as a collaborator with the non-governmental organization, Catalytic Communities, in order to interview favela residents, including students, teachers, and parents, and to conduct observations of schools and education-based NGOs. As part of that collaboration, I produced a series of articles for the online news site, RioOnWatch.org.

My research aimed to examine the effects of poverty, violence, and stigmatization on the quality of education in public schools in favelas and how quality varies between favela and non-favela schools. More than 1000 favelas have developed in Rio de Janeiro since 1899 when the first favela was settled, so I decided to conduct research in diverse favelas across the city. I focused on two favelas in the South Zone, Rocinha and Vidigal (where I lived during my field research period), two favelas in the West Zone, Cidade de Deus and Rio das Pedras, and one favela in the North Zone, Maré. Looking at multiple favelas allowed me to examine how different factors affect public education. For example, three of the favelas had been pacified by the municipal security force, the UPP (Unidade da Polícia Pacificadora), which takes control of areas back from drug traffickers, though each varied in the success of that project. Rio das Pedras was under the control of militia forces, and Maré was still under control of drug trafficking gangs. In each case, the security of the community impacted the quality of schools.

The timing of my field research aligned with a unique moment for Brazil, as it prepared for and executed the Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro and as it continued to deal with the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and continued corruption scandals of major politicians. I was also able to interview public school teachers who were in the midst of a four-month-long strike and observe several meetings, protests, and marches.

I witnessed many challenges to the public education system in favelas, which led to disparate results for students inside and outside of the favela. The hours of instruction, teacher absenteeism, and deteriorating physical infrastructure are all examples of the challenges students and teachers faced. However, through my research, I witnessed a strong resilience in the face of these challenges. In response to issues, favelados created their own solutions and continued to believe in the power of education to positively change the lives. Residents founded NGOs to provide safe spaces for students, administrators adjusted class schedules to ensure student safety, and parents found alternative schools for their children when unsatisfied with favela schools. While these solutions cannot fix the disparity of education in favela schools, I believe they play a large role in the education system and should be viewed as a resource to be more utilized.

The Mellon Fellowship allowed me to embed myself into favela communities, to make connections with favelados, and to immerse myself into life in Rio de Janeiro at a very specific and important moment in the country's history. The funds provided by the Mellon Foundation were invaluable to conducting my field research and to writing my Master's thesis upon returning to the University of Wisconsin-Madison.