



# Listen to your children Rocinha! And Jardim Catarina as well!



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Improving Early Childhood Education in Fragile Contexts  
International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood  
at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro - CIESPI/PUC-Rio, Brazil  
Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Scotland  
Director: Irene Rizzini | Executive Coordinator: Maria Cristina Bó  
Author: Cristina Porto<sup>i</sup>  
Editors: Renata Brasil, Irene Rizzini and Malcolm Bush

In this second newsletter we write about the importance of listening to children talk about their lives. We describe our recent experiences working with the Brazilian National Coalition on Early Childhood Education (RNPI) on talking with children about their experiences during the COVID epidemic. You can learn more about the Coalition's activities at [www.primeirainfancia.org.br](http://www.primeirainfancia.org.br).

This newsletter springs from the project named in the title and is conducted by research teams in Scotland, Brazil, Eswatini, Palestine and South Africa<sup>ii</sup>. Newsletter no. 1 and more details about the project can be found at [www.ciespi.org.br](http://www.ciespi.org.br).

## “COVID changed our lives”

As with countries the world over, the project's five countries have been seriously impacted by COVID. Our accustomed world has changed profoundly in a short space of time. Over 3.8 million people have died and over 176 million infected. In-person contact has been severely constricted, national economies devastated, and families thrown into poverty and hunger. In Brazil, the percent of families suffering from food insecurity has risen since 2018 to 55%, a 54% increase over the previous figure<sup>iii</sup>. While Brazil has a good public health system with well distributed health clinics that are able to deliver COVID vaccinations, the country has from the beginning of the outbreak lacked a sufficient supply of actual vaccines. Now several research laboratories are producing foreign vaccines on license but the federal government's refusal to take the pandemic seriously has resulted in tens of thousands of avoidable deaths.

In Brazil, children have been out of school for over a year. During this time, some of them could engage in remote learning with computers or cell phones but many lacked reliable internet access and computers. Even some of those who had access had trouble learning remotely, and younger children in particular needed the constant

assistance of adults in the home. Parents who still had jobs struggled to find child care for their children.

## What do children think of all this?

While COVID changed the lives of parents, it also changed the lives of children. What do they have to say about the pandemic? What kind of future are they expecting? We need to listen to children to shape a post COVID world that responds to their concerns. CIESPI recently played an active role in listening to children about the pandemic through the National Coalition on Early Childhood, a coalition of over 200 nonprofit, government, and private sector organizations, and its Circle of Action group<sup>iv</sup>. The Circle of Action talked to thirty-two children between the ages of four and eleven from various parts of Brazil including the states of Bahia, Ceará, Goiás, Pernambuco, Piauí, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul and São Paulo. The children were invited to make drawings of their impressions of life under COVID and then to talk about those drawings. The Circle made a video of those conversations and drawings for broad distribution so that children and adults throughout the country could learn

about the children's views and about the possibilities of eliciting children's views. The English language version of the video is available here:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nz3oqtxeiNA2rCRHlxkBT0s4uO3X4Mun/view?usp=sharing>.

The children were forthright about what was happening in their lives under COVID. They talked about what they felt being isolated at home, about death, their families, their friends, and school.

There were first a set of general reactions:

*This life is so boring!*

*I hate the pandemic.*

*Sad; many people in our family are dying.*

*It is difficult to be so far from the world.*

*No-one can touch anyone.*

*I am living a long way away from my grandmother and that is horrible. I miss her. Her house is so wonderful. Here, I live in an apartment. I am so agitated. I cannot bear living in the apartment.*

*I cannot go out. I cannot play with my friends.*

Some comments were about missing school:

*If everyone dies, I won't be able to go to school.*

*I can't go to school. I can only go to school with a mask and every time I go out, I have to go out with a mask.*

*It is so awful, because we have to spend so much time on the computer to do our classes. It is difficult to spend so much time looking at a screen, because you end up being distracted by anything. But it is also good, because we can spend so much time with our families.*

*In school you can understand better.*

*I am always thinking about school, I always loved everything about school. I loved recess. I loved everything there at school. Now I look at this pandemic and I am completely scrambled up.*

*I want to be able to hug my teachers because I really miss them.*

The children were also asked what they hoped for in the future:

*I want the Coronavirus to end because I cannot go to school, nor can I see my friends. I cannot make a trip. I cannot visit my friends.*

*I want the vaccine to come soon.*

*I want everyone to be well.*

*I want the world to change and for only love to be inside it.*

*I want people to understand that the world is equal and that everyone is like everyone else.*

*That quarantine ends and everyone can hug.*

The children showed that COVID was very much on their minds and that they had very specific reactions to how it was impacting their lives and what they wished for in the future. Their comments range from the minutiae of living with COVID to broad hopes for a better post-COVID world.

While it took some effort to collect these view points from around the country, it was quite possible and, if done more frequently, could create the norm of listening to children on important issues. This is a norm demanded by Brazilian legislation in its founding statute on early childhood<sup>v</sup>.

It is a legitimate question to ask how to communicate with young children, about their views and feelings. The younger they are, the more children communicate with their bodies, their gestures, through games and their scribbles. As they grow older, they take more visibly independent actions. A mother in Bahia saw that her nine-month-old was restless as the family was locked down by the pandemic. So, she decided to

take her on a car ride through the city. During the trip the mother saw the amazement and contentment on the baby's face as she looked through the car window at the world outside. A one-year-old in the small town of Arraial do Cabo on hearing any music would lift up his right arm in a dance pose ready to be picked up by any family member to dance.

A mother in Rio saw that her usually active eight-year-old had lost interest in anything during the quarantine. But little by little she developed the freedom to read, to dance and to draw on her own. She created games with a group of friends on her cell phone but never adapted to online classes. But on the days of in-school classes she woke early, put on her uniform and waited anxiously for the moment to set off to school.

Older children can also respond to more concrete issues in sophisticated language. In Piauí, a reporter, Neyara Pinheiro, received a video from a girl in which she was saying, "all children have the right to study, to play, to enjoy themselves, to go out to snack, and to the park". Curious, the reporter decided to visit the girl's home in Coelho Neto in the state of Maranhão, a city without basic sanitation or an electric grid. There she met "professor Erica" a twelve-year old girl, daughter of a garbage waste picker<sup>vi</sup>. Erica told her that the children in her neighborhood were sad because they had nothing to do and so she, Erica, formed the "School of Hope". She used material found in

waste dumps by her mother and build a classroom for her friends to use to meet and play<sup>vii</sup>.

### Summary

While it will not be a surprise how expressive young children can be, this knowledge rarely translates into the realization that young children can and should be heard about large issues affecting their lives and into giving them the opportunity to express themselves and be heard. Children of different ages will express themselves in different ways but the onus remains on the adults in their lives to promote opportunities for these expressions on the important issues that impact children.

CIESPI continues to experiment with a variety of ways of engaging young children into talking about their lives and several of these projects can be found on the CIESPI website at, for example, at [encurtador.com.br/cgFG3](http://encurtador.com.br/cgFG3). This example shows how young children were given silhouettes of photographs of children which contained the children but not the context. The children were then invited to fill in the context to show what they thought about life in their city<sup>viii</sup>.

We invite people interested in the inclusive and participatory education project to contact us by email at [primeirainfanciaciespi@gmail.com](mailto:primeirainfanciaciespi@gmail.com) or Whatsapp at +55 21 98266 7045.

<sup>i</sup> English translation by Malcolm Bush.

<sup>ii</sup> The project is supported by the UK Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) of the United Kingdom and is organized by the Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. The support of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) is gratefully acknowledged (ES/T004002/1).

<sup>iii</sup> Olhe para a fome, 2021.

<sup>iv</sup> Various organizations were part of this initiative including Casa da Árvore/ RJ, /ISC/UFBA, CIESPI/PUC-Rio, Instituto Viva Infância, Secretaria Executiva da RNPI, ANDI, Pastoral da Criança, Comitê Gestor Estadual/PCF/PI, Tempo Junto, Usina da Imaginação, OMEP/BR/RS/NH.

<sup>v</sup> Marco Legal da Primeira Infância, LEI Nº 13.257, de 8 de março de 2016.

<sup>vi</sup> Catadoras or garbage waste pickers are a regular part of urban life in Brazil. They are people who search large garbage dumps for usable waste which they recycle to earn a living.

<sup>vii</sup> The video which was sent the reporter is accessible at Neyara Pinheiro' site at [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCc\\_Wo-yjTEA6cKV-Mj7spGw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCc_Wo-yjTEA6cKV-Mj7spGw).

<sup>viii</sup> This project titled *Contrasts* was developed in partnership with CIESPI's partners at Østfold University College, Østfold, Norway.



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