

Listen to your children Rocinha!



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Improving Early Childhood Education in Fragile Contexts
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As part of our project, *Participative and inclusive early childhood: increasing the education opportunities of children in vulnerable contexts*¹, we interviewed twenty early childhood teachers to understand what would improve the educational context of young children in the community of Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro. All the teachers worked in early childhood education centers (ECECs)² with children 0-5 years old.

The questions followed the project's interest in finding out how to improve safety, inclusion and participation in early childhood education. While we were not able to interview any men, we promoted the diversity of the sample by including public, private and non-profit institutions in various parts of the community. The centers varied in size from 20 and 577 children enrolled.

Most of the teachers thought their center had enough staff to care for the children although five, mainly in public institutions, disagreed. In most of the non-profit centers that received per-diem payments from the city, staff reported soliciting extra contributions of up to R\$100 per month from parents while the private centers charged R\$620 weekly or full day and R\$350 for half a day attendance³.

The public institutions were free. All forms of center infrequently received donations including food, books and toys.

Inclusion

The respondents saw schools as having the function of including all children, perceiving the children's individual particularities, and allowing their participation in all activities to stimulate their development. Part of the job was teaching the children about diversity and preparing them for society and for this, the participation of the families was fundamental. Inclusion was particularly related to children with disabilities and the teachers described a number of strategies for including these children in the daily life of the schools. About twenty-five percent of the teachers said they had seen an increase in the number of special needs children in the year after the COVID pandemic. One difficulty in serving special needs children was the inappropriate structure of the schools which were not built for educational purposes. Teachers also mentioned the need for specialized professionals to assist the children. They mentioned audiologists, psychologists, and language specialists.

Included in the number of children at risk were children who did not have the opportunity to attend good creches and were sometimes looked after in situations without the best hygiene, attention or care. Children who lived in households

with occupants involved in the drug trade were at risk as were those in families with drug problems. Racism also negatively impacted children. Armed conflict sometimes closed the schools. Public services were weak in the community including basic sanitation and public transit.

Teachers pointed out that schools could not provide everything and that health, and social assistance services needed to be improved and the number of early childhood places expanded. Parents needed more information about what resources did exist in the community. Professional diagnoses of children with problems were slow and difficult to obtain. But some public schools had help from travelling intermediaries from a facility called the Resource Room which would put together an individual educational plan for a child with disabilities. This institution could not, however cope with the demand.

We also asked our teacher respondents about the consequences of COVID for inclusion. They listed issues which affected families, the schools and the children during the epidemic. Struggles which already existed, intensified. Families lost jobs and had financial difficulties up to the point of struggling to feed their families. The reduction of public resources sent to ECECs *conveniadas*⁴ and

the fact that some parents were unable to pay private schools meant the many centers had to close.

The restrictions on attending health clinics because of the priority put on Covid cases, and sanitary restrictions which limited interaction with family and friends impacted children's development. Respondents also pointed out the increased demand for slots in public institutions because the economic fallout from the pandemic meant fewer families could afford private centers.

We should note one complaint teachers had about parents. They alleged that some mothers had the notion that children don't learn in an ECEC but that they are there only to play and that early childhood was not a stage in their children's educational development.

Three quarters of the teachers thought that poverty interfered with a child's capacity to learn pointing to poor families limited access to goods and services. The lack of equipment and decent internet access was a problem for several reasons including the fact that enrollment happened on line and that some school activities demanded the use of this technology. Poor quality food caused sleepiness, apathy and difficulties concentrating, and the scarcity of transportation which limited movement impacted opportunities for development. In the face of families' financial difficulties and related problems children could be agitated, sad or even aggressive in school.

The bottom line of inclusion for young children is the ability to attend an early childhood center. A majority of the respondents said that there were more children needing places than places. Demand outpaces supply especially in the public creches which are free. School only becomes mandatory at age four and so ECECs for children between six months and three years and eleven months are offered on a lower scale⁵. Children with handicaps had the greatest difficulty in getting a place and some mothers would not mention a child's problems to the school for fear of losing a place for that child. Once a place was guaranteed, a parent might come and tell the school about the problem and apologize for not mentioning it before for fear of losing the place. There are few places at the nursery level and creche places are automatically offered to young children leaving nursery school.

In general, for our teacher respondents, participation meant the child being involved, interacting, playing, learning and engaging in all the school's activities. Being in the school does not necessarily mean participating, and it's up to each teacher to identify and help those who need more attention to relate and get involved. In these cases, it is fundamental to talk to the children, hear what they have to say, and think together to stimulate their involvement through activities which arouse their interest and are valued by them.

Half of the respondents mentioned the participation of families as fundamental for the pedagogical work involved in early childhood education. This involvement could happen at meetings and other activities proposed by the schools. It happened by following the material sent home; paying attention to the school's request for materials to be used in the school; and talking to the children about their day at school, praising their achievements and learning. The teachers thought that family involvement was very important. *"If a family does not participate, we can see the difference in the development of the child. A child needs care, she needs the eyes of everyone who is around her. (...) In early childhood education, the participation of the family is essential."* Respondents warned that many of the children's needs could not be met by the schools alone because of the lack of appropriate space, of specialized staff or of other resources.

The respondents agreed that the children participated actively in the process of learning with the conversation circle being the most common way to promote their participation. During an activity, the children interacted with their peers and teachers, talking about various aspects of daily life inside and outside school. The notion that children should be protagonists in their learning appeared a number of times. *"I see in the majority of teachers this intent to stimulate the curiosity, to stimulate a child to develop hypotheses, to ask, to question."* But this perception was not universal. As one teacher explained, some teachers did not work with the idea that early childhood education was a period to stimulate knowledge and discoveries.

Our respondents said that in general the children participated but that the behavior of adults and the profile of their families tended to

determine how they behaved. Some adults had trouble perceiving the children: *"The adult! The adult for me is always an obstacle. Because people are entrapped in extremely traditional practices, and cannot see the child."*

The teachers added that those children with most difficulties in their school trajectories should not be compared to the others and should be helped to maintain their interest including with the use of pedagogical games and toys. And the most agitated who often distracted the others reinforced the need for support staff to help the other teachers in the classroom.

According to the teachers, a majority of parents participated in the activities the schools set up to involve parents in their children's learning. The schools sent home activities such as drawings, paintings, collages and reading which encouraged parents and children to work together. Some teachers, however, pointed out that not all ECECs favored the participation of families whether because their contact was limited to giving directions or because of the hours the proposed activities were held. There were also families who needed more encouragement to participate either because they worked long hours or because they did not value early childhood education. A majority of the teacher respondents pointed out that work responsibilities was the main obstacle to family participation. This problem was even greater for single mothers or fathers and for families with many children. In these cases, the ECECs were places to leave their children with confidence while they fulfilled their other responsibilities. Some teachers said that among some parents there was a lack of commitment, seriousness, maturity and understanding about the importance of early childhood education. But they also understood that many people had not had educational opportunities or had not learned to value them. In the parent interviews, however, there was a different perception that some teachers did not make the effort to tell parents what was happening in their children's day at school leaving parents feeling unconnected to their children's education.

All the teachers said that there was time and space to listen to the opinions of the children. Once again, conversation circles were mentioned as the most practical method but there were also conversations during activities or at the end of them and paying attention to the behaviors and

expressions of the children. In the case of babies, watching them closely was essential.

Safety

When asked about the safety of the children in their care, two aspects of safety were mentioned frequently: physical safety and emotional safety. Young children were constantly running and jumping and so needed special attention. The teachers said that the schools invested in their preparations to receive children, removing obstacles which could cause accidents, using accessible furniture and toys and making sure there were nets capable of guaranteeing the children's physical safety. These nets, and the protection of doors and windows, care in using the bathrooms especially at bath time, using cleaning materials before the children arrived, and the restriction of access to people unknown to the school were important. For some children, school could be safer than home. *"At times the child is somewhat nervous because of what happened at home and the safe harbor is us. And so, we must always work with much love and care to transfer a sense of safety to the child."*

We also gained from a significant number of teachers a sense of the limitations of the ECECs and the complexity of the topic. They mentioned the lack of safety in the city of Rio de Janeiro, preoccupation with food security and children of Rocinha's lack of access to essential goods and services such as health and social services.

All except one respondent said that the children were safe in the early childhood centers. One of the teachers mentioned that her institution had established protocols in the event of shootings to shelter children and staff in the safest places⁶.

A majority of the teachers also thought that the children were safe in their homes. But several talked about their concerns with domestic violence and sexual violence against children. They said that there was a lack of financial resources and the presence of psychosocial problems which prevented some families from caring for their children, and they asked for more attention from the social assistance and guarantee of rights systems. They also talked about their concerns about the rise of crime in the community and the imminent risk of armed conflict. Bullet shots exposed the entire community to danger. The

abusive use and significant circulation of drugs including by children were also concerns but residents did not feel safe enough to complain.

When asked what could be done to improve safety at home and in the community a majority mentioned placing more priority on public actions. *“First the lack of basic sanitation, access to lights, water, healthy food, places for leisure which are almost non-existent, cultural centers, more libraries, places planned with children and infants in mind.”*

Interestingly, one teacher thought that the community should not blame mothers who lost a child to the drug trade. According to her, many people judged mothers and blamed them for not teaching their children, but in the majority of cases they were doing all they could.

Final considerations

The teachers in the early childhood education centers basically agreed that children *“learn playing, they learn singing, they learn in exchanges with adults, with a friend by their side, they must interact with this being different from themselves.”* But they also said that there should be alternative places available to the children which provided activities which stimulated their involvement. While Rocinha had projects and opportunities for children, most of them were inaccessible for young children either because of their age group or because of the cost of participation.

Through the conversations, we got the perception that the children in the community showed behaviors more mature than usual for their age. About twenty-five percent of the respondents thought that the local living situation forced the children react to instances of rejection and inequality at the same time as submitting them to violence, child labor and abuse. As one teacher put it: *“Look: the children of Rocinha learn a lot about race, about force, about the will to want. Because they, poor things, do not have many opportunities, they simply don’t. The schools try to give them the best they can but unhappily many things don’t depend on me, on what I want.”*

The importance of the participation of the family in the children’s education was mentioned frequently. If, on the one hand, teachers demanded efforts from parents and responsible adults to participate in the activities offered by the schools, they also knew that socio-economic issues could limit this participation. For this reason, offering support to the families was fundamental for the development and well-being of the young children.

The teachers knew that what they were offering the young children in Rocinha was vital for the children’s well-being, were aware of the many problems the children faced and realized that the early childhood education centers could only provide some of the resources the children needed.

¹ This project was developed with the support of the UK Global Challenges Research Fund of the United Kingdom. The international principal investigator is Professor Kay Tisdall at the Moray House School of Education and Sport at the University of Edinburgh. The project is coordinated in Brazil by Professor Irene Rizzini of the Department of Social Work at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and president of the International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood at PUC-Rio.

² We use this term to cover preschool for children 4-6 and what in Brazil are called creches for children 0-3.

³ BRR\$ 1 = US\$ 0.19

⁴ The creches conveniadas are early childhood centers for children aged 0-3 which, while nonprofit, contract with the city to provide a specified number of slots in return for per-capita payments.

⁵ Another CIESPI publication shows that in the state of Rio de Janeiro only 25% of children 0-3 in Brazil attend ECECs. See “Policy Bulletin no. 1 Children 0-3 need access to early childhood education in Brazil”

⁶ Gun fire was especially prevalent during police raids with residents complaining about apparently random shooting.