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6

Contrasts: children and the city:

Methods for listening and participation.

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Contrasts: children and the city: methods for listening and participation

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The International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood (CIESPI) is both a research and a reference center operating in conjunction with the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). It is dedicated to the development of studies and social projects about children, young people, their families and their communities. Its goal is to inform policies and social practices for these population thus contributing to children's full development and for the promotion of their rights.



Rio de Janeiro, July 2019

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The text was written by Cristina Laclette Porto, Nathercia Lacerda and Irene Rizzini and translated by Malcolm Bush.

Introduction

I wish I had a treasure map
which could take me to an old chest full of treasure maps

Paulo Leminski

Thinking about a city is fascinating. And thinking about a city as a child is even more so. Children are looking at what adults do not see, curious about details, for those things which are at their height. Each age lives its own time. It is difficult to know what babies are thinking without observing their movements, their smiles, their tears, the direction the fingers are pointing in. In their push chairs whoever pushes cannot see where they are turning their heads, what attracts them. A dog who comes close catches their attention. As they grow a little, holding hands, walking, they stop because of an ant or because a passer-by said something. Children aged four or five attempt games, they jump, avoiding stepping on lines in the sidewalk, or on stones of the same color. They grew a little more and begin to talk among themselves or with their older companions. They ask questions which often do not receive replies. Resisting the pressure to arrive at a designated stop they attempt diversions, playing in the squares they encounter on the way. They try many times to occupy the gymnastic equipment intended for the elderly. When they are able to go out in small groups, they don't realize the noise level of their bodies and they bump into other passers-by, making a noise and crossing the streets in defiance of the cars. Alone, they are excited by the freedom they are finally getting,

but are frightened by not knowing how to act in the face of danger. But where is this danger hiding? There are many related factors which place children in a state of vulnerability.

Large cities have become hostile places for children of all social classes who are less and less present in the streets or the squares. City streets have acquired the permanent connotation of being places of danger or just for passing through and not places for exploring a child's curiosities. A journey on foot or games which encourage an encounter with someone as yet unknown confronts obstacles such as intense traffic, pollution and danger.¹ As Muller and Nunes (2014) point out there is:

an acceptance of a power relationship which associates as an imperative the use of urban space almost exclusively for the adult. In order to deter a dialogue about child protection, adults easily exclude them from the city, restricting their access to both public and private spaces or places previously designated public spaces (Muller and Nunes, 2014, p 670).

1. On this topic see Research and Policy Bulletins CIESPI/PUC-Rio # 3 and #5.

The majority of children are steered in directions considered most protected or secure, which, however, do not favor diverse interactions. Shopping malls, clubs, cinemas, theatres, parks and cultural centers and museums, in principle open to all, cannot be seen as solutions to this problem because, in Rio de Janeiro, in general, they are elite places which block the entry of poorer and less educated people and are concentrated in particular parts of the city. Moreover, these establishments are concentrated in certain parts of the city, while several neighborhoods do not even have a public library accessible to children.

Meanwhile, the city street in its struggle to become a place of encounters and social and cultural learning is many times forbidden to the most protected children and also the least protected.

The most protected have limits on their opportunities to explore at random attracted by the unknown for experiences they can not imagine but intuited by the particular curiosity of childhood in the exploration of what is like them and unlike them.

Poorer children who paradoxically have in the city street their sole opportunity for survival are seen as undesirable by society for being themselves perceived as a danger (Rizzini and Vale, 2018). This city street of false liberty shows itself most forcefully when there are groups of children who are protecting themselves. The city street of festivals, of cultural and political demonstrations, a place of discovery and reflection open to careful observation and scrutiny is relegated to be understood and assimilated as not a place to be or live in.

It has become a place of transit between localities with walls which, with the justification

of concentrating certain activities, have become barriers which limit or even stop sharing with those who are known or who are as yet unknown. What one sees is a city street as a place or not a place for encounters, seen from on high or through windows. It is a place of impossibilities where danger and mistrust live. A place constructed by the fear industry.

But if the city street as a collective desire seems to be blocked from existing, the city street as a place of assembly for ideas and thoughts needs to be reinvented because it is changeable like life itself.

But how can this be done? How to search for inspiration in this first sight that children give to the city streets. How can one light the paths that express the desires of children?

Pesavento (2007) offers several clues about a city implying forms to represent it be they the written word, oral testimonies, the images that are painted, photographed, designed or filmed. As this historian at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul points out:

Real cities, concrete, visual, tactile, consumed and used day by day correspond to certain imaginary cities to show that the urban is the greatest work of many, that this work never ceases to be reconstructed, by thought and action, creating other cities in thought and action (Pesavento, 2007, p.14).

The author suggests that we are able to appropriate the city as a theme. For her it is interested to remember that the city is also a sensibility.

Cities are, in excellence, a cultural phenomenon or integrated in this principle

of significant attributions in the world. Cities presuppose the construction of an ethos, which implies the attribution of values that we agree to call urban (Pesevanto, 2007, p. 14).

Utopias, hopes, desires, individual and collective fears meet forms of expression which can be recognized and made visual. A city can be represented for its inhabitants in a way of been thought of collectively, serving as a base for the

invention of the future. The invitation to do this can be made to the most diverse groups.

This bulletin is intended to sketch the importance of the creation of methodological pathways which promote and included the listening and participation of children in debate, and in the elaboration and implementation of public policies with respect to the construction and (re)creation of democratic cities.

Childhood, the city, listening and participation

In its more than thirty years of existence, CIESPI at PUC-Rio has affirmed the importance of developing methods of listening, dialogue, and participation with different social actors, including children of all ages. Its various spheres and networks of action are predicated on the ethical promise to respect the rights of children and young people. The methods of informing public policies in a systematic way with many participants is exemplified in its participation in the Work Group for the Implementation of the Municipal Plan on Early Childhood in the city of Rio de Janeiro and in the Work Group on Child participation connected to the National Network on Early Childhood.

In dialogue with the multidisciplinary framework of the new studies on childhood and the child, studies are carried out with:

[...] the intention to make possible meeting with children situated in their contexts, listening to them, translating them and affirming them as an act of liberty; to

construct, starting with the children, other images of childhood which lead to a more local perspective from the children's description, from listening and from their voices and participation (Barbosa, M.C.S.; Delgado, A.C.C.; and Tomas, C.A., 2016, pp 107-108).

Manuel Sarmento (2015), professor at the University of Minho, in Portugal, with experience in sociology with an emphasis in the sociology of childhood, has a perspective that is in dialog with this vision. For him, studies in this area struggle with two challenges: understanding different childhoods and defending children's rights, incorporating children as essential spokespersons when thinking about public policies directed at them. Studies, in addition to observing and analyzing children on their own ground, must develop activities which



allow them to express themselves on any given theme by means of diverse languages including drawing and dramatics.

Studies developed by CIESPI seek to include the participation of social actors in many areas. In 2010, to cite one example, in Playful Messengers, youth in the Rio community of Rocinha walked the streets with colorful figurines telling the story of the community and suggesting games. Backpacks and bags among other props attracted the attention of curious passers-by who interacted to make connections among the generations in this community which has all the complexities of the city. According to one of them, 'it is in the street that we understand the reality that we live and discover what our own windows are incapable of showing us'.²

With sensitive listening for what we do not see happening but also with strategies, often subtle, created by adults and children to deal with the barriers, it becomes possible to see the light at the end of the tunnel. As Sarmento argues (2018),

Cities, with structured social spaces, with the means of control, are made particularly visible in the formal and symbolic interdictions on children (in terms of circulation, access, mobility, interactions and social practices) and on the transgressions they commit (Sarmento, 2018, p.233).

One example of an alternative approach to these prohibitions emerged from a meeting of responsible adults of children in a partner public school in Gavea in the southern zone of Rio de Janeiro. One of the parents, a resident of Rocinha,

2 More information is available at: <https://centroludicodarocinha.wordpress.com/cartografia-ludica-2/> Acesros on 27 June 2019

explained that he had the habit of walking through the streets with his son telling him the history of the boy he the father was, where he walked and whom he played with. He tried in this way to connect with the child who is alive in that neighborhood, sharing with the child and guaranteeing that in some way that his, the father's experiences, will be passed on. The local fears, still there, came to occupy a second place in this relationship between father and son. The father was able to instill a curiosity in the child stimulating a knowledge of the community where they lived.³

This meeting and intergenerational dialogue show in a fundamental way how the experience of children in the world can be enriched and expanded. However, the space in which this occurred is not naturally available and it is necessary to create such projects with the objectives of these meetings and dialogues.

Methods for listening to children which impel young people to be connectors between the worlds of youth and adults and which recall for the adult the child he was, are a thought-provoking challenge. It is not only a question of creating opportunities for differences to be expressed, but also of enabling those difference to be negotiated and promoted through the exchange of ideas (Rinaldi, 2006).

But how to create a context of listening which make possible and enriches collective learning? Let us see how our experience in the Contrasts project came to teach us.

3 This testimony emerged in an activity that took place as part of the CIESPI/PUC-Rio project Rocinha Ludica, in partnership with the Program Cultura Viva, from the Municipal Department of Culture of Rio de Janeiro. For more information, access <http://www.ciespi.org.br/Projetos/Em-andamento-12> Acess on 27 june 2019.

The methodology of the contrasts project

One of the objects of this bulleting is to describe a methodology in development at CIESPI which considers children's points of view to understand the dangers and potentials of the city of Rio de Janeiro. Knowing their opinions about issues that affect their lives allows us to enlarge our knowledge not only of the children, their experiences and views, but also of their social reality.

Educational institutions can be considered strategic places for research about children. Prepared to think critically about the world, they bring to together children of different backgrounds, many of whom have little opportunity to show what they think in other contexts. We established partnerships with different institutions for pursuing various activities namely two public schools, a community creche, and one private school. A majority of the children were residents of Gavea, Jardim Botânico, Leblon, Ipanema and Botafogo, all communities in the southern zone of Rio.

Before meeting the children, the researchers were driven by several questions. Which of the children had free time to play and relate to nature? What were their experiences of play? How did they travel through the streets, what were their encounters with different people or different events in the city? What was it like to spend whole afternoons in shopping centers at their ages? How many of them went to the theatre or to museums? What films did they watch when they went to the cinema?

Up to the present, about 560 children between the ages of six months and thirteen years have participated in the project and inspired the production of various materials including an illustrated dictionary for children from three years up.⁴

The experience of the first four meetings, carried out with boys and girls aged nine and ten in a public school, once analyzed gave rise to the original title of this article "The views of children about their cities; reflections about their contributions",⁵ and informed new questions which rose in the other research sites.

The photograph was one of the methods chosen to provoke a conversation putting the focus on children as the producers of culture and giving visibility to the different contexts and innumerable contrasts. Drawing was another resource, used and understood as a representation of thoughts and emotions, that is as a privileged form of expression. Despite the importance of free drawing, this was not our point of departure. How did our new idea emerge?

In 2015, CIESPI and University College Østfold in Norway mounted a photo exhibit called

4 A newsletter that explains some of these experiences is available in the CIESPI/PUC-Rio website: http://www.ciespi.org.br/media/Projetos/Em%20andamento/Contrastes_folder.pdf. Access on 17 April 2019.

5 PORTO, Cristina L., RIZZINI, Irene. La visión de los niños sobre sus ciudades: reflexiones sobre aportes metodológicos. **Sociedad e Infancias**. Norteamérica, 1, ago. 2017. Available from: <https://goo.gl/CYZGvG>. Access on 27 June 2019.

"Children in Rio de Janeiro: Contrasts" to illustrate the different lives of children in Rio particularly the different lives of low-income children and better off children. This was part of a continuing effort to show the reality of children's lives in contrast to the stereotypes that circulate about them. Professional photographs choose to value and share certain gestures and expressions which relate to a particular theme to be presented.

As staff observed and reflected on the interactions between adults and the photos in the exhibition they began to ask, 'and children, how would they react? How could the photographs become a tool for listening to them?'.

This thought became the key to define a trigger element, silhouettes. The shape of the gestures of each child photographed were extracted and placed on white paper to form a silhouette.

Figure 1 - Photo-transparency-silhouette



Archive-CIESPI/PUC-Rio

One of the sources of inspiration for this methodology was the conception of knowledge of Walter Benjamin synthesized by Kramer (2011).

For philosophy, it is necessary to decontextualize the object so that it can function as a text; the collector is able, just as the historian, to decontextualize in the way of any researcher, to interact with the object (interactions and discursive practices) and attribute to it one of innumerable possible thoughts (Kramer, 2001, p.389).

At the beginning of our project, children were invited to interpret the silhouettes starting with their vision of the city. The gestures that

were highlighted would be recontextualized. The staff's hypothesis was that the contrasts growing from the children's perspectives would encourage an internal dialogue which would feed the language of each of the children. As they connected with each other, different ways of thinking about the city would open up. We sought in this way to "denaturalize" stereotypes and preconceptions and give value to coexisting multiple cultures.

As the project became defined, creches and schools in partnership with CIESPI in other projects opened up to this proposal. Students, family members, teachers and school coordinators among others were brought into the project as co-authors.

Spaces for listening: workshops and exhibitions

How did this project happen? In the workshops, the meetings started with a presentation where the CIESPI staff talked about their interest in knowing how children thought, felt and imagined the city in which they lived. Depending on the age group, some games were used to bring the children closer to the project. Then, while the children talked about the ideas that came into their minds and how to transform the drawings, the team wandered among them taking note of what they said and photographing their actions.

In some cases, as they saw the researchers photographing, the children asked if they could do the same. With camera or a cell phone in their hands, they also photographed themselves and what was happening. And so more detail was added to the possibilities for our analyses. What did the children choose to portray?

It was always important to avoid inferences and interpretations engendered by the researchers. For this reason, the researchers asked for titles for their drawings from the children themselves reflecting their ideas about their creations. Some of the children preferred not to add a title and this was respected.

When comparing the drawings with the conversation that followed as the children showed the group what they done, it was possible to develop an idea of how the city street was seen by them and to reflect on the scenes they had created.

In figure 2 one can see children playing before a workshop; a silhouette and drawings which were labelled 'a kite caught', 'a guy planting a banana tree in the Lake Rodrigo de Freitas', and 'basket

ball in the backyard'. This mosaic brings together the expressions of children from a variety of participating organizations and shows similarities, playful experiences in the middle of nature, and the distance between the photograph and the silhouette which came from it.

Figure 2 - Games; silhouette; recreated of gestures and scenes; original photograph



Archive-CIESPI/PUC-Rio

The young children aged four to five years old tended to color the silhouettes and to place in them a house, their closest family, a street, the school, the beach, a church, the Rio Botanical Gardens, or the escalator in the Gavea shopping center. But what drew most attention was what they said while they were drawing. The piece of paper seemed small in contrast to what they wanted to say, and their internal dialogues were created on

the spot. Daily actions related in detail, were added to by adventures lived by television personalities or actors. In addition to the titles, the researchers tried to note the most of what they could capture: 'he is taking a bath', the baby is crawling in the street into the house

to find his mother', he is trying to save Batman and Wonder-Woman', 'he went to the street: he fixed his hair and went out to the street', the girl is climbing up a stone staircase', 'in my mother's car, I and the dog. The name of the dog is Teheize from some music I know'.

Figure 3 - Designs of 4 and 5 year-old children



Archive-CIESPI/PUC-Rio

It was only at the last workshop that the team showed the children the original photographs. Looks of surprise and smiles are provoked from those interesting and provocative contrasts. Some of the children recognize themselves in the scenes in the photographs, others are astonished that they did not imagine those scenes.

One way of turning this 'visual listening' for a larger public was to organize small exhibitions mounted on moveable structure. On these occasions, more conversations were triggered in a permanent process of co-creation.

Figure 4 - Exhibitions in different spaces



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Key learnings

In addition to the drawings made by the children, what was most precious were watching and listening to what the children said and did during the process because that revealed a very rich set of understandings about their daily lives, habits, dress, dreams, games and interests.

The intersection formed by the drawings, the titles, photographs and accounts in field notes needed to be analyzed after every session, at each step, because the potential of this method of listening became evident in this creative process and was in a constant state of construction.

The silhouettes provoked curiosity and fomented new and rich discoveries encouraging games and conversations among the children themselves and with the teachers and researchers. The methodology became more detailed when it assimilated the contributions that came from these encounters. The culture of the children from different places and those recollected and lived by the majority set the tone and generated reflections about childhood and the city.

As well as the children, the partnering schools and the actors of different ages who participated in these experiences were understood as co-creators and co-builders of the project such that the partners were understood to be protagonists in the actions.

Thinking of children in the city and how they expressed themselves demanded an expansion of looking and reflecting on the physical,

social, emotional, and cognitive aspects of development. Public policies and proposals should be conceived of in an integrated way, recognizing children's rights. How can one talk about children without considering the young people one is thinking about? How can one talk about childhood with talking about social mobility and without approaching children's culture in all its different possibilities of expression? How can one talk about culture without talking about education in its connection with the dialectic and liberty? How can one talk about childhood without thinking about the city street as a space of social interactions?

Constructing public policies for children and young people as integrated people involves reflection and an interdisciplinary approach. To listen to them as active partners in society demands methodologies which have a clear direction but which are open to correction and co-participation.

While the Project Contrasts has a clear direction on how to approach the theme 'childhood and the city', with each group session the conversation about the drawings and photographs promoted an expansion of the original idea including adaptations, diversions, and new ideas. The dialectical space provided is guided by an ethical point of view which recognizes the cultural and identity pluralities and contributes to the formation of people and creators in solidarity in their relationships to themselves, with others and the world.

However, there is not one unique model that can be replicated, and yes, this is a dynamic process. Care must be taken so that public policies and practices about child participation are not framed in and stuck in place. Tisdall (2012), for

example, in analyzing questions related to the sphere of policies and practices about child participation in the United Kingdom argues that a setting in a particular, limited framework can limit the potential for transformation.

Final considerations

The city street as a place of refuge, without caring and lacking pleasures, is also a place of breezes, of flower beds, of the sky and of sea water. A critical approach which raises questions and reflections, which raises the possibility of the conception of another city and structure, by and for everyone, enlarges the possibilities.

The Project Contrasts, in listening to children, families and teachers can contribute to taking back the vision of the city as an expansion of

humanity and of fraternity in constructions and reconstructions which favor a shared life; which can contribute to the increase of looking and action and generate doubts about a city with firmly defined and exclusionary propositions about living together. These doubts can point to a future, however distant, of a street in a city of and for everyone in its struggles and complexities but, a living and fraternal street city.

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