

Listen to your children Rocinha!



Project Bulletin No. 5, April 2022. Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy
Improving Early Childhood Education in Fragile Contexts
International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood
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From the beginning of this international action research project, CIESPI has sought to provide some direct benefit to its reference community, Rocinha in the State of Rio de Janeiro¹. We hope the project will provide long term benefits in terms of improved policies and practices to promote the education of young children, but CIESPI has always believed that it should provide some direct benefit to its research communities. This bulletin describes two such efforts taken in continuous consultation with community members. In both cases, community leaders and organizations were consulted and involved at every stage.

The campaign to promote the vaccination of children five and older against COVID-19

As we started this action, only 51% of children 5-11 years old in Rio de Janeiro had received their first vaccination and only 22% their second dose². The lack of federal investment in vaccination campaigns and the circulation of fake news about vaccines resulted in the low figures of children vaccinated. So CIESPI staff began conversations with its project advisory council, the three public health clinics in Rocinha, and municipal experts who all agreed that help with getting the word out about the importance of vaccines would be most useful.

Our first effort was to hire a sound truck to travel the two asphalt roads in the community with a message about the importance of vaccinating children. The message was that vaccinations were safe, crucial and children's right and that the responsible adults should take their children to the nearest public health clinic to get vaccinated. But the vast majority of homes in Rocinha are not directly accessible by roads but by stairs and alley ways. The next step was to rent a megaphone and walk through those alleys speaking the message and posting flyers.

All this was done in partnership with the community. The collective Rocinha Resists, the Museum Sankofa, and the project Rocinha for Life were key

partners who walked with us, put up posters and distributed pamphlets. Also important were the staff of creches and preschools, the Guardianship Council and public health agents who helped us produce the materials. We also had the help of the young people described in the next action below who were learning about early childhood education and how to interact with young children in the community. They were particularly helpful in accessing social networks. While we do not have hard data about the impact of the intervention, the clinics reported an increase in children coming to be vaccinated after the week of the campaign.



Community youth as early childhood assistants

Rocinha has about thirty creches and preschools organized as public ventures, semi-private ventures and private organizations. Our research shows that they are constantly struggling for fiscal stability, have serious infrastructure problems and difficulty retaining trained staff³. Training young people to interact with young children in cooperation with several early childhood centers would give the community both extra assistance in the centers and produce a cadre with a special interest and training in interacting with young children⁴. The training which took place throughout the initial six months of the project emphasized the importance and techniques for listening to young children, and play activities for them. The six young people were selected with the assistance of the project's community advisory group and each received a stipend for the period undertaking to participate weekly in first training sessions and then online and in-person sessions with groups of children. The in-person sessions took place in two early childhood centers that were involved in the project from the start.

They were a heterogenous group between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four with different personal experiences who lived in different parts of the community. Part of the training included reflections on their childhoods and the observed life of children in the community especially in regards to education, safety, health, and daily life. The CIESPI staff also engaged the young people in literature and in constructing toys, games and musical activities for young children.

Before they encountered the community children, the young people were given kits including books, paper, paints, and playdough. The children's books were chosen because they contained images of the variety of young children in Brazil by gender, ethnic background and skin color. Then the youth themselves were helped to design and make toys, poems, and drawings to work with the young children. In the six months the youth interacted with about 170 young children on-line and in person.

The director of one of the participating centers reflected:

It was wonderful. The children really liked it and the classroom teacher thought it was great...I found the school full of energy and very excited.

We knew from prior research that children's books were very scarce in homes and schools in the community so as part of this action we distributed 450 books in kits in the community including in creches and preschools centers and to the parents who had taken part in the parent interview part of the larger project. There is some degree of illiteracy in the community so the books were chosen partly for their expressive drawings so that parents who could not read could tell stories to their children from those drawings.



Some thoughts on the actions

CIESPI operates in conjunction with the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). PUC-Rio as well as being a major research university also regards itself as a community university meaning that it feels an obligation to the communities in which it operates. It takes that obligation seriously so that CIESPI's actions in the nearby community are seen as an important part of the university's mission. Such a commitment is not common in universities in Brazil and in other parts of the world.

But PUC-Rio and CIESPI are research institutions. Both these actions contributed to the broader research project in initially unforeseen ways. The larger project was built on legal theory on the rights of children to inclusion and participation. As we planned and accomplished the actions it became apparent that they were most relevant to the project's goals. The right to inclusion includes the right to medical care and access and willingness to use access to COVID-19 vaccinations is clearly a vital right for young children.

Inclusion was defined in the larger project as not just the fact of being included but also the existence of key early childhood resources so that it was possible to

include children. The presence of eager and trained young people in the several early childhood centers promoted the existence of quality early childhood opportunities and hence by our definition inclusion. The distribution of materials including books for young children provided scarce resources critical to early childhood development.

The broader project relies on the definitions of participation found in Article 12 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which emphasizes child and youth participation in decisions about their lives. But all kinds of participation are relevant to a community context that supports young children's development. In our actions we included training young people to interact with young children and to participate in advocacy to promote the vaccination of young children. It also included inviting the participation of community action organizations in the vaccination campaign. The delivery of children's books to parents who were interviewed for the project gave them materials they needed to participate more effectively in their children's education.

While we entered the actions with the project's definitions and goals at the front of our minds, it was only by being involved in these community level actions that we fully realized the broader theoretical possibilities of our work. Expanding the definition of inclusion to mean the presence of key resources was an early discovery. The actions pointed to the larger possibilities of our two key terms. The legal, children's rights definitions of inclusion and participation are key advances in thinking about children's rights⁵. But examining those rights in the context of community

engagement has given us a fuller and richer notion of how those terms can be thought of in ways that promote the contexts in which children live and their development.

The legal notions of inclusion and participation have a very wide scope. They apply to all kinds of situations. And legal scholars are constantly describing shortfalls in their application. But there will always be some aspects of inclusion and participation that will not be implemented. This fact suggests that it is incumbent on proponents of these rights to decide what aspect of them should be given priority and this should not be just a law driven decision but a decision based on the weight of the consequences for non-implementation on the target population. That weight should be partly decided by that population for two reasons. The first is that individuals are the best judge of what impacts them most with the caveat that they may not always know the options available to them. The second is that the implementation of some rights will depend on pressure from a number of actors including those whose rights are being denied. Families with young children have limited time and energy and will only devote some of those scarce resources to issues they feel strongly about.

The two action projects described in this bulletin arose from community knowledge about the importance of the two topics. The actions were framed with community input. While we should wish to pursue the rights of young children to inclusion and participation in all their aspects, consulting the community about their concerns and interests suggests a way to determine priorities.

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² Data from the Rio de Janeiro municipal Panel on Covid 19, March 2022.

³ See Project Bulletin No. 4, The Voices of early childhood staff in Rocinha, January 2022, at www.ciespi.org.br.

⁴ This material on training the youth comes from CIESPI staff Cristina Lalette Porto, Carolina Terra and Nathercia Lacerda, "Early childhood and community action in Rocinha: Youth (re)discovering their childhoods".

⁵ See for example, Christina McMellon and Kay M. Tisdall, Children and Young People's Participation Rights: Looking Backwards and Moving Forwards, *International journal of children's rights* 28 (2020) 157-182.



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