

Listen to your children Rocinha!



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Improving Early Childhood Education in Fragile Contexts
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As part of the Project¹, CIESPI staff interviewed twenty parents or adults living in the low-income Rio community of Rocinha who were responsible for children aged 0 to 5². The interviews covered a variety of themes relating to the education of the young children in their care. The following account summarizes the adults' views on the three major topics of the research project. Depending on the circumstances, the adults were either interviewed in person or online using phone or Whatsapp. We note that inclusion and participation are overlapping terms and that the parents' responses reflect that fact.

We are grateful to those adults for their cooperation in the project and have made every effort to keep their names confidential.

Inclusion

Parents had several ideas about inclusion relating to such topics as access to education, health, leisure, accessibility, transit and income. But in general, it was not talked about much among the parents of the young children. As one parent said: *"I guess I have not heard this word inclusion"*. But when they considered the term in relation to their young children's education, they saw it as being about accompanying their children in the educational process and so helping their development and learning. As one parent put it: *"Inclusion for me is having the father, the mother, the grandmother, all the world involved in the education of the child"*.

Inclusion was also seen as young children being welcomed in educational spaces by the adults, by listening carefully to them and the adaption of practices that contribute to the common good. Some of the parents talked about the need for a greater number of professionals trained to give various kinds of support to the children and their families including specialized

services for children with disabilities, chronic illnesses and for any problems that could impact on their development and learning.

When asked whether some young children in Rocinha were treated differently, most parents replied yes pointing to aspects of family and community life, social and economic factors and the basic difficulty of getting access to early childhood slots inside and outside the community. The children most likely to get treated differently were those who did not receive the proper support from their families whether because of parents working long hours and not being able to accompany the day to day lives of their children or because of the precariousness of their income or unemployment in the family. The difficulty of getting a place in early childhood education because of the lack of places and the absence of places to play in the community for young children also contributed to the context of inequality for those who lived in the community.

Parents, in general, thought that their children had no difficulty taking part in the activities of the early childhood learning centers

(ECLCs). But some parents thought that a lack of dialog between the institutions and families, the reduced number of professionals and limited access to the internet during the pandemic were factors which impacted on their children's inclusion. One mother whose child had disabilities and a chronic illness thought that her child did suffer exclusion in the ECLC on account of the child's limitations and fear the organization had of hurting her.

Our respondents thinking about ways of increasing the inclusion and participation of their children in the ECLCs suggested such strategies as guaranteeing access to the internet through government projects, and increasing the number of teachers and specialists. They particularly emphasized the importance of such professionals as educational psychologists, audiologists and social workers. We conclude that the coordination of schools, families and local initiatives is fundamental for guaranteeing inclusion in early childhood education.

A majority of parents interviewed thought that there were parents in the community who wanted to place their children in ECLCs and preschools but could not find places: ***"Not everyone succeeds. Because there are few places."*** Parents of babies and young children with disabilities thought they were most challenged because of the special attention their children needed. In addition to the problems of the delay in getting a place in a public institution, a number of families had difficulties paying the monthly rates for private organizations. Several families had more trouble keeping their children in the centers during the pandemic as unemployment and economic difficulties increased during that time. We were told about the lack of information about enrolment as many parents said that they did not know how the decisions to admit children were made.

Parents liked many things about the ECLCs and preschools their children attended. They liked those activities which taught their children resourcefulness and to develop independence.

Some parents liked the relationships among the ECLC staff, children and families especially when there were channels of communication and opportunities for parents to participate with the schools. Throughout the interviews, however, parents complained about the lack of communication between the institutions and the families, the reduction in the number of professional staff, the lack of individual attention to the children, the institutions failure to adapt to children with disabilities, disorders, and chronic illness and even the poor quality of the food.

Parents also made suggestions about what would improve the programs such as full day rather than half day classes, offering teachers training course, the provision of language courses, sporting activities, emergency healthcare and better accessibility. Some of the parents pointed out that for these things to happen there would have to be more investment including public sector investment to improve infrastructure, increase the number of places, and qualified professionals.

Participation

The families defined participation as their constant presence in the daily lives of their children interacting with them as they accompanied the children's development and learning: ***"Everyone must participate with the child; to see her grow to be by her side. Because she depends on people. Not to mistreat and to give education"***.

Parents thought it important to accompany and give support to the children in their school activities, to participate in meetings and other activities suggested by the ECLCs or pre-schools. These are not simple things to do especially for single mothers who need to care for their children and run their households alone and for those who work outside the family and who depend on their bosses' permission to attend these events.

On a lesser scale there were parents who criticized some schools for not informing families

as to the children's school routines and for not involving adults in some activities. One parent said: *"We are never invited to participate in anything"*. Parents of children with disabilities or chronic illnesses were particularly concerned about participation: *"Participation is for me related to inclusion and about including children in activities, in general, from day to day"*.

As for participation in the community, some participants said that the children did nothing locally because they did not know of any accessible or interesting places for them. They added that the local squares were not maintained and lacked free playground equipment suitable for young children. Other parents talked about the risk of the children being exposed to violence and gun shots as dangers which restricted the children's circulation in the streets. But some parents, however, said the children did spend time in places in the community but that there were too few places for the local demand. The vast majority of parents, however, said there were no safe places for their young children to play in the community.

There were private child caretakers who were very useful when the parents' work schedules clashed with pick-up times at school. Some parents regretted that they did not have enough time to spend with their children but relied on the support of family members and, during COVID, virtual connections to be present.

In the home, parents undertook a variety of activities with their children including play and joint household tasks to promote their children's learning. They talked about games, drawing, painting, reading and music. One parent who could not read told her grandchildren stories using images from a book. Helping with homework set by the school was an important job for most families. Despite these efforts, some parents had difficulties paying attention to their children's learning at home partly because of a shortage of time. There was also sometimes a shortage of experience and knowledge: *"She has been learning about vertebrates and invertebrates. And I thought, how*

can I explain this to her? At her age I couldn't even write my name".

Safety

Parents ideas about safety in Rocinha were very influenced by micro-geography and by physical violence. These fears were explained by the fact of being exposed to gun shots between police and drug dealers and rival gang factions and by limited access to public services because of the almost absence of the state in the community. Their two main concerns for their young children were to protect them from armed conflict and from domestic accidents: *"Safety for me is that you are able to come and go without fear that something could happen to your children, to you"*. And another parent said: *"Today, if you're going to play in the alley, you run, you take three steps, you're hitting your face against a gun"*.

What was necessary was the constant presence of parents and of people to watch over their children, giving them attention, care and education: *"I think that the principal factor that develops safety for a child would be this: the help which whatever person closest gives to them"*.

While the majority of respondents thought that their children were not safe in the community, some modified the view of daily violence by stressing community network which helped with the care of children and the existence of local rules imposed by the drug traffickers which reduced the incidence of such crimes as robberies, kidnapping and the abuse of children.

What would, however, improve the safety of their children in the community would be the end of the illegal drug trade. Other things mentioned were: more respect among people and less discrimination; full day schooling; more services and opportunities for the community; greater access to health care and to health specialists; and solutions for basic sanitation problems such as the closing of open ditches which caused disease.

Many parents thought that home was the only safe place for children because then the children were in their company, because there was restricted access to the house or because the house was surrounded by other buildings and, therefore, less exposed to the stray bullets that came from armed conflict. Parents with children who had disabilities said they had to be particularly careful and adapt their homes to the needs of their children: *"In my house there is nowhere to sit and there is only one table because I took away everything close to him because he climbs up and jumps"*.

Most parents thought their children were safe in the ECLCs and pre-schools especially since these schools had protocols for dealing with armed conflicts such as hiding the children in a safe place, locking the doors, and not permitting anyone to enter or leave. The educational centers restricted access to the buildings, keeping the doors shut and having staff monitor the circulation of people. Children could only leave the building if accompanied by a registered responsible adult. But parents pointed out that safety issues were not just specific to the schools and that there were risks on the journey to school because sometimes on those journeys the children were exposed to the sale of illegal drugs and the presence of armed people.

As for their young children's sense of safety some parents said that their children became agitated and alarmed when they heard fireworks and shots in the Community: *"At just three years*

of age, she understands what a shot is and that someone is going to come. She shouts mother, mother, shots, shots. She cannot see an armed person without saying 'I am going to die; I am going to be killed'. I am not sure whether she saw something or whether she heard someone".

Other parents thought that the children were too young to understand the idea of safety but added that it was crucial that the children remained close to the family to maintain a sense of safety: *"The definition of safety for them is this: to be close to their father or mother"*.

Final thoughts

The inclusion of children and their participation were important to parents as, of course, was their safety. But we learned that the subjective and objective conditions of each family limited or created opportunities for the development and education of their children. We were also told that that these critical conditions were directly related to the population's access to high quality public goods and services and that the support of the state was essential for the full protection of young children.

We also learned how important it was to learn from parents directly their thoughts on these topics. You are invited you to comment on this bulletin or any other aspect of the project at our site www.ciespi.org.br by email at ciespi@ciespi.org.br or at WhatsApp: +55 21 98266 7045.

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² In this text, parents are taking to mean parents and responsible adults in the family who have responsibility for the care of the children.