

Children in Brazil aged 0-3 urgently need early education but many lack places to attend: immediate action needed

Malcolm Bush and Renata Mena Brasil do Couto

Introduction

A wealth of international studies points to the crucial importance of access to early childhood learning centers (ECLCs) for very young children. The impacts of such education are particularly large for children from lower-income families. Those impacts include greater success at later stages of education and in employment.

Yet data show that many young children lack the opportunity to attend ECLCs for the simple reason that there are not enough places for them. Moreover, lower-income children who need this educational foundation the most are much less likely to attend them than middle income children. This situation is a national disaster as the country loses the opportunity to give many children a better start in life.

This lack exists despite the right to such education embedded in the Federal Constitution of 1988 (paragraph 208), in the Children and Adolescent Statute (paragraph 54) and in the National Legisla-

tion for Education (paragraph 4). It was also recently reinforced by a Supreme Court decision restating that it was a duty of the state to provide the resources necessary for children up to the age of 5 to attend ECLCs and preschool¹.

The analysis presented in Bulletin #1 is part of the international project Safe, Inclusive and Participative Pedagogy (SIPP): Improving Early Childhood Education aimed at improving the educational context for young children living in low-income communities and in contexts of vulnerability. In Brazil, even though the project has a national, state and municipal scope, it concentrates at the local level on the community of Rocinha, located in the city of Rio de Janeiro. In this brief report, we gathered qualitative data from semi-structured interviews carried out with twenty professionals from ECLCs and preschools who work in the region and with twenty mothers, fathers and legal guardians, residents in Rocinha, in addition to data from national and international surveys².

Benefits of preschool education

Data extracted from meta-analyses show strong long-term effects for preschool education³:

- Preschool is associated with large increases in standardized test scores and these observed effects persists over a 10 - 25 years period. Attendees at preschool have substantially lower problems such as school drop-out, unemployment, poverty and criminal behavior in later life⁴.

- Early childhood education leads to significant and substantial decreases in special education placement, grade retention and to increases in high school graduation rates⁵.

- Higher quality ECLCs and preschool and full day programs produce better results.

- Lower-income children benefit more than middle income children from early education because

they start at an educational disadvantage⁶.

- Early childhood education pays in terms of higher wages and lower social costs. Investment in such education in the U.S. has a 16% rate of return on the initial costs, a very high return⁷.

Recent data

The Brazilian National Plan for Education requires that 50% of children 0-3 years old and 11 months have places available for them in ECLCs by 2024. In 2009, 20.4% of children in this age group were enrolled compared to the 38.9% in 2019⁸. Although the 2019 figure represents a considerable increase over 2009, it is still too low. More disturbing is the variation in enrollment by income. According to the report *Desafios do acesso à creche no Brasil: subsídios para o debate* (Challenges to accessing early childhood learning enters in Brazil: con-

tributions to the debate, FMCSV, 2020) whereas 55% of children from the wealthiest 25% of families were enrolled, only 26% of children from the 25% of families in the lowest income quartile were enrolled. The children who would most benefit from attending ECLCs are massively underrepresented in them. There was also a racial divide in attendance. 54.1% of white children are enrolled in ECLCs compared to 45.1 of black and brown children.

The same report included a definition of children who “needed” ECLCs (Índice de necessidade de creches or INC, Index for ECLC demand). This definition included single parent families (defined as a household with a young child and only one person aged 18 or above), and/or families with economically active mothers/guardians in the work force or who would be in the work force if there were an ECLC place available for the child, and/or children living in a low-income household. The nature of the needs in each of these categories is somewhat different but each involves vulnerabilities for the child, vulnerabilities only magnified by non-attendance at ECLCs. In 2018 in Brazil, 46% of children 0-3 in urban areas were “in need” by these definitions, 23% because of poverty, 2.7% because of having a single parent, and 20.3% because of an economically active mother/guardian.

One striking characteristic of ECLC attendance is the difference in attendance rates depending on geography. The state of Santa Catarina has the highest attendance rate in the country (60.4%), followed by São Paulo (54.4%), which has the highest rate in the southeast region. Rio de Janeiro (35.1%) has the lowest rate in its region, while the state of Amapá (7.7%), located in the northern region, is the last in the national rankings. In the that region, in fact, there are other 3 low scoring places: Rondônia (13.6%), Amazonas (13.6%) and Pará (18.9%). The difference in attendance observed between the states of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro which are in the same region may suggest that some differences may depend on political will and allocation of the necessary resources to guarantee children the implementation of their rights.

One of the factors that impacts the quality of early childhood education is the number of children per classroom. Smaller classes allow teachers to provide individualized attention to students, following their specific needs during the learning process. Although national legislation does not mandate the appropriate relationship between the number of students per teacher, the Ministry of Education recommends that the proportion should be based on age range: one professional for 6 to 8 children from 0-1 year, one per 15 children aged 2-3 years and one per 20 children aged 4-5 years. In Brazil, in 2021, the average number of students per class in ECLCs was 13.4 and, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, 15.3. In the city’s public units the average was 22.6, while in private units there were 11.1 students per class⁹.

Infrastructure in ECLCs and preschools poses many challenges. In the 2021 School Census, MEC and INEP analyzed 9 types of resources considered important for the development and learning of children, such as the existence of a sports court, green areas, playground, patio, adequate bathrooms, toys and games. On these indicators, the performance of municipal units was worse than that of private units at the national level. More than 50% of municipal ECLCs and preschools lacked some six of these resources. It is important to highlight that specialists indicate that physical activities are fundamental for the development of children since their first years of life.

Another important quality parameter for early childhood education is the adequate training of professionals. The 2021 School Census on Teacher Adequacy (Adequação Docente do Censo Escolar) reveals that in Brazil, 60.1% of early childhood teachers have a degree in the subject they teach, 64.9% in the public system and 50.6% in private units. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, the percent is 38.7%. Of these, 41% work in public ECLCs and preschools and 16.1% in private facilities. Objective 19 in the National Education Plan (PNE) aims to ensure that all basic education teachers have specific higher education training and obtain a degree in the field in which they work. The PNE also aims to have 100%

This publication is part of the project

Safe, Inclusive, and Participatory Pedagogy: Improving Early Childhood Education

Support: UK Global Challenges Research Fund - United Kingdom

The international principal investigator is Professor Kay Tisdale at the Murray House School of Education 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.

Editors: Renata Brasil, Irene Rizzini e Malcolm Bush

of basic education professionals take continuing education courses by 2024. The Common National Base for Continuing Education (BNC-FC), approved in 2020 by the National Education Council, provides for improvement courses of at least 40 hours, and courses and extension programs (180 hours minimum), in addition to master and doctorate degree. Data show that only 40% of teachers took continuing education courses (with a minimum workload of 80 hours) in 2021¹⁰. Although there have been advances in both indicators in recent years, we are still far from reaching the PNE targets for the 2014-2024 decade.

The expansion and improvement of these measures and consequently of the quality offered in ECLCs depend on financial resources. In 2019, for example, national funding through FUNDEB paid R\$ 3,956.34 (US\$ 782) a year for a child to spend the whole day at an ECLC. This amount was considered 2.5 times lower than necessary, according to the National Campaign for the Right to Education¹¹. Previous studies by CIESPI/PUC-Rio on early childhood education already pointed out the dangerous deterioration of the infrastructure of ECLCs and preschools, the challenges of finding and keeping qualified teachers in poor areas of the city, the difficulty of paying for children's food and the insufficiency of educational resources¹².

Current data continues to suggest that the quality of early childhood education in the state of Rio de Janeiro faces serious challenges.

Information about the Rocinha community and early education

Consultations carried out with residents and professionals who work in Rocinha offer a qualitative approach to the data and allows us to perceive the impacts of the lack of investments in early childhood education in the daily lives of families¹³. Rocinha is a densely populated low-income community, located on a steep slope in the southern part of the city of Rio de Janeiro¹⁴. CIESPI/PUC-Rio has been working with key local actors for many years and the community constitutes an important reference for the Institute.

Among interviewees, the vast majority indicated that there are mothers and fathers in the community who want to enroll their children in ECLCs but cannot find vacancies: "There aren't vacancies for everyone because there are a limited number". Those vacancies that exist often do not meet the needs of families, either because of the opening hours of the institutions, their location, the costs of mon-

thly fees or the lack of accessibility and specialized professionals. Babies and children with disabilities face greater challenges obtaining places because they require special attention.

There is a lack of information about the enrollment process in public ECLCs and preschools including the criteria for fulfilling vacancies. Online registration is an additional challenge in poor communities where many families do not have internet access or a reliable internet connection or equipment such as computers or tablets. For private school enrollment, the greatest difficulty is the payment of monthly fees. Although discounts and grants are offered, a significant number of families are unable to afford education expenses, especially since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, which deepened unemployment and negatively impacted the budget of Brazilian households.

There is a lack of resources for ECLCs and preschools to expand and improve their services, especially for the hiring of more teachers and specialized professionals to care for children with disabilities and to cover costs of renovation of the physical spaces. Many of the buildings in which ECLCs and preschools are located were not built originally for this purpose. Teachers emphasized that the possibilities of helping children with disabilities were very limited. When identifying deficiencies or other issues that require special attention, mothers and fathers are called to meetings and advised to consult with specialized professionals outside of the school. Such professionals are hard to find and expensive. Many ECLCs and preschools do not have the resources to meet the demand for teaching assistants when children need one. Publicly funded institutions face other problems since the per capita payment amount determined by the municipality (R\$650 a month) has been the subject of dispute in many administrations and the municipality often pays the non-profit ECLCs late.

Rocinha faces other serious challenges related to daily life and its impact on children's educational opportunities. Interviewees listed the following: instability in the water supply which impairs the functioning of bathrooms and kitchens; poor access to transportation which make it difficult for children to access ECLCs and preschools, and lack of adequate public safety making it virtually impossible for young children to play outside their homes. The absence of leisure and cultural spaces aimed at children in early childhood, essential for their development and learning, is a serious problem. All these issues demand public attention and investment.

Call to action

- Experts consider ECLCs essential for children's development. During early childhood (0-6 years) most brain connections are made and early stimuli have the greatest potential for future development¹⁵.

- Investment in early childhood education generates positive impacts on the quality of life of children in the present and the future, especially those from poor families.

- Although the number of enrollments in ECLCs in Brazil increased until 2019, there has been a reversal of this trend since the beginning of the pandemic. Between 2019 and 2021, ECLC enrollments dropped by 9%. The decline occurred mainly in private institutions (minus 21.6%), but also affected public services (minus 2.3%)¹⁶.

- The federal government's 2023 budget proposal sent to Congress cut 97.5% of funds for building ECLCs. The proposal foresees only R\$ 2.5 million for “the implementation of schools for early childhood education”, an amount that would only be enough to build five new ECLCs throughout Brazil¹⁷. It is hoped, however, that the election of a new president, who comes into office in January 2023, will change that amount.

- The provision of safe and good-quality ECLCS and preschools expands the work possibilities of mothers, fathers and guardians, improving living conditions of families and reducing social costs for the State.

Qualitative and quantitative findings of this research strongly suggest that greater investments in the expansion and improvement of ECLCS and preschools should be a priority on the national political agenda.

Notes

¹ See story on Supreme Court website Supremo Tribunal Federal (stf.jus.br).

² Other key actors working in the community and children are also being consulted and their perspectives and insights will be published in later documents.

³ A meta-analysis uses special statistical tools to combine studies on the same topic to determine reliable trends.

⁴ GOREY, Kevin M. (2001). Early childhood education: a meta-analytic affirmation of the short- and long-term benefits of educational opportunity. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 16(1), 9–30.

⁵ MCCOY, Dana C. et al. (2017). Impacts of early childhood education on medium- and long-term educational outcomes. *Educational Research*, 16(8), 474–487.

⁶ VAN HUIZEN Thomas; PLANTENGA, Janneke (2018). Do children benefit from universal early childhood education and care? A meta-analysis of evidence from natural experiments. *Economics of Education Review*, 66, 206–222.

⁷ HECKMAN, James A. The economics of human potencial. Disponível em: heckmanequation.org/resource/13-roi-toolbox/. Acesso em: 14/10/2022.

⁸ FUNDAÇÃO MARIA CECILIA SOUTO VIDIGAL - FMCSV. Desafios do acesso à creche no Brasil: subsídios para o debate. São Paulo: FMCSV, 2020. Accessible at: fmcsv.org.br.

⁹ MINISTÉRIO DA EDUCAÇÃO - MEC; INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS E PESQUISAS EDUCACIONAIS ANÍSIO TEIXEIRA – INEP. Censo Escolar 2021. Brasília: MEC; INEP, 2022A.

¹⁰ MINISTÉRIO DA EDUCAÇÃO - MEC; INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS E PESQUISAS EDUCACIONAIS ANÍSIO TEIXEIRA – INEP. Relatório do 4º ciclo de monitoramento das metas do Plano Nacional de Educação. Brasília: MEC; INEP, 2022B.

¹¹ FMCSV, 2020.

¹² BOGHOSSIAN, Cynthia O.; BUSH, Malcolm. Espaços seguros para a Primeira Infância na Rocinha - Resultados da pesquisa. Rio de Janeiro: CIESPI, 2016.

¹³ Results of the consultations carried out are periodically published in the series of research reports of the project, available at www.ciespi.org.br. In this document we rely especially on GOMES, Eliane; CASTRO, Leonardo. Informe 4, Rio de Janeiro: CIESPI, 2022 and GOMES, Eliane; CASTRO, Leandro; COUTO, Renata M. B. Informe 6. Rio de Janeiro: CIESPI, 2022.

¹⁴ Rocinha is considered one of the largest favelas in Brazil. Between 70,000 (IBGE, 2010) and 200,000 (local residents' association) live in the community, depending on the source of the data.

¹⁵ FUNDAÇÃO MARIA CECILIA SOUTO VIDIGAL - FMCSV. Primeira Infância em pauta - Um guia para aprimorar a comunicação dessa fase fundamental da vida (Early childhood - A guide to improving communication at this critical stage of life). Available at: <https://www.primeirainfanciaempauta.org.br/indice.html>. Downloaded: 17/10/2022.

¹⁶ MEC; INEP, 2022A.

¹⁷ VENTURA, Manoel. 2023 budget proposed by Bolsonaro cuts 97.5% of resources for new daycare centers: there is only money for five schools. *O Globo online*, Brasília, October 14, 2022.