

Listen to your children Rocinha!



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Improving Early Childhood Education in Fragile Contexts

International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood

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This issue addresses four years of research capped by four community meetings that focused on priorities for improving the early childhood learning environment. Between 2020 and 2023, CIESPI researchers conducted 56 interviews with parents, residents and teachers in Rocinha as part of the project Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy: Improving Early Childhood Education in Fragile Contexts (SIPP)¹ aimed at discovering ways to improve the early childhood learning context in the community. They also talked with thirty children between the ages of three and seven on the same topic.

To complete this process of discovery, the team organized with neighborhood residents and professionals four open, at large encounters to discuss key issues that arose from the research. A total of 200 people attended these meetings at the Sports Complex of Rocinha including residents, teachers, professionals at various service agencies, and members of collectives, social cultural projects and local associations. These were the first large scale meetings ever held in the community to discuss early childhood.

CIESPI invited people to bring their children to the meetings and while the adults talked, our group of young activists who had played and talked with children during the research, the Play Troupe², looked after the children with games and reading in a specially prepared room.

First meeting:

Development and the quality of life

In the meetings we used questions, and visual aids such as photos and books to get the attendees to participate in the conversation. While CIESPI staff including residents of the community guided the discussion, we also invited residents of and professionals in the community to comment on the themes.

In the first meeting on May 22nd 2023, we examined the question of what was necessary for the healthy development of young children in the community and whether children, in fact, had access to these resources. Two community professionals led this discussion. One mother with three children diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum emphasized the importance of love, and this reply was echoed by other commentators. Several other mothers were bothered by what they saw as a lack of welcome in the schools and the difficulty schools had including children with handicaps as a result of the absence of support professionals. The support of such professionals is a right guaranteed by the Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of People with Disabilities³. One mother said, *"I struggle every day against a system which does not have inclusion"*.

In response, some of the teachers present said they understood these concerns but they pointed out the difficulties schools had because of the lack of resources and adequate training.

The discussion touched on other aspects of child development important to all children including the necessity for welcoming environments, respect for the individual, consideration for different socio-economic and cultural realities, and the importance of continuing training for teachers.

Participants talked about their concerns with violence which could incur inside a home and with the absence of safe places outside the home. A collective effort was needed to overcome these and other violations of rights. Collective efforts among family, school, the community and public bodies were necessary to guarantee a healthy and safe development for children.



Photograph: Leandro Castro

The examination of several photographs of the community elicited responses. One that showed Rocinha from the top produced the responses that the community was very dense but beautiful and the comment that it was necessary to walk through the community to see what residents were talking about. The photos illustrated the absence of safe places for children to play. Some older residents said that now they did not see children playing with kites and marbles as they did in the past. One photo showed a child crossing an open sewer on a piece of wood and people commented on the historical struggle of the community for basic sanitation.

A photo of a child sleeping on a gym mat in an early childhood education center (ECEC) aroused

questions on the lack of comfort for children and the need for airier and well-lit environments. Some talked about the interruption of breast feeding because mothers had to return to work and the high rates of tuberculosis and other respiratory illnesses in the community.

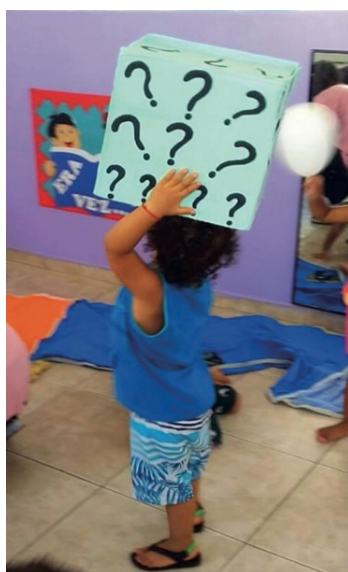
The photos drew comments about the mobility difficulties experienced by children with disabilities. Children in wheel chairs very often did not leave the house because of accessibility issues. Limited space affected the emotional well-being of children and their ability to dream. **"A child cannot dream in such a small house. They get compressed and squeezed"**. This idea was connected to a child's right to experience the city, the necessity of contact with nature, and the importance for children of being in places outside the borders of Rocinha.

At the end of the event everyone was invited to summarize their experience and feelings about the meeting in a single word. Among the words shared were hope, empathy, unity, sharing, reflection and strengthening. These words really reflected the shared reflections of the meeting.

The second meeting: mental health

Two mental health professionals and a Rocinha mother representing *Inclusive Inclusion* dedicated to children with disabilities guided the session.

The COVID pandemic was pointed out as contributing to the worsening of the mental health of children and adolescent in the community and its impact was greater for children with disabilities or with a diagnosis of autism. But the situation for children with mental health problems was bad before the epidemic. The scarcity of specialized professionals such as psychologists, occupational therapists and audiologists, and health equipment were a huge barrier to adequate care.



Photograph: Archive CIESPI/PUC-Rio

But it was not just the absence of these professionals which had an impact. The mothers pointed out that they felt the lack of psychological support in the

classrooms as well. They felt alone, the need for support in their daily lives and to join together to support each other. **"Mothers need a united front. Families want to be heard"**. This sensation of helplessness was felt too by the professionals who at times felt tired and badly paid which influenced the care they gave. Both groups understood the need to create collective strategies to press the authorities for their rights and remedy the situation.

The third meeting: anti-racist education

A school administrator and the founder of an important local community organization guided the third session. The session was kicked off by the CIESPI staff person involved with her daughter and her daughter's friend in the writing of the book *Young black girls: the history of my black* which described the two young girls experience of racism on account of their Afro hair styles and their reactions to that discrimination. Excerpts from the book dealt with issues of identity, self-esteem, and resistance, crucial themes for the fight against racism from childhood on.

After this presentation, the group began to discuss various personal experiences pointing out the impact of racism and discrimination on young children's sense of identity. People pointed out both explicit and implicit forms of racism.

It became apparent that Rocinha is a community with diverse origins. So, experiences of racism were diverse. Racism impacted different groups in different ways for different ethnic groups, people from *quilombolas*⁴ and others, showing that the fight against racism had to be broad based and tackle all forms of prejudice and discrimination. People recalled the law (10.639/2003) which demanded the inclusion of Brazilian culture in school curriculums and the need to press for the implementation of this law.

One participant pressed the need to recover and value the culture of black ancestors as a means of combatting racism. Another resident mentioned the initiative in a local school to introduce black dolls in classrooms and stressed the importance of ethnically representative material in schools. **"We must talk about this in the classrooms"**.



Cover: Adilson Adão

Fourth meeting: possible actions

In this fourth and final meeting, participants revisited the central themes from the prior meetings. The aim was to discuss how to take the demands to managers in and representatives of the public sector to put into action and monitor policies capable of improving conditions in Rocinha and in the lives of its young children. The demands were as follows:

Young children's development and the quality of their lives:

- 1) There is a lack of dialogue between parents and the staff of early childhood learning centers.
- 2) It is important to increase listening not only to children but especially to their families who are young children's main representatives.
- 3) It is important that caring respects diversity, is professional and increases the opportunities for dialogue between the institutions and the families.
- 4) There is a shortage of professionals prepared to deal with emotional issues and it is important to offer psychological help in the schools.
- 5) There is a shortage of school caregivers.
- 6) It is important to show affection and guarantee physical, emotional and nutritional safety in all the places children and families gather.
- 7) There is a shortage of safe places for children.
- 8) The mobility of children with physical disabilities is a challenge in the community.
- 9) Public policies on early childhood must encourage collective efforts.
- 10) Rocinha needs the establishment of a solid network of support to face the violation of rights common in the community.

Mental health and the struggles of children with disabilities:

- 1) There is a shortage of high quality, accessible services with specialized professionals.
- 2) Schools lack preparation to look after children with mental health issues and to help their families.
- 3) The health services lack individualized treatments.
- 4) The whole of society must recognize and respect the capacities of children and adults who are on the autism spectrum.

5) The law #13/935/19, which deals with the provision of psychological and social work services in elementary public schools, should be supported and strengthened.

6) The group emphasized the importance of social mobilization on the topic of mental health.

Anti-racist education:

1) It is important to recognize the diversity of Rocinha. Various ethnic groups suffer from racism and are invisible in the debates and strategies about education.

2) Strengthening self-esteem and the construction of identity are ways of confronting racism in educational institutions.

3) Early childhood education is an important space for encouraging expressions of identity for all children and for respectful practices of living together.

4) Anti-racist education is fundamental for producing tools and activities which support the deconstruction of racism.

5) There is not an open debate and confrontation of racist situations with strategies for listening to children and being open to their feelings on the topic.

6) Schools need to promote conversations both with children and adults about racism and the experiences they have had in or out of the home.

7) There should be play opportunities with an emphasis on anti-racism with suitable books and e.g., black dolls.

Based on these issues, participants considered it fundamental to spread information about early childhood in Rocinha. A good starting point would be a discussion with mental health professionals about the care of mothers and their children with mental health and disability challenges. The participants are constructing a document with priority demands to be discussed with key actors in the public sector. We invite all the residents of Rocinha to join this journey and to learn more about the project at www.ciespi.org.br or through WhatsApp: 21 98266 7045.

This text concludes a series of information products about the project Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy: Improving Early Childhood Education in Fragile Contexts (SIPP) and we thank everyone who has helped the project in any way.

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 Yasmim Souza, Nicolas Cabral and Elaine Silva, are part of the Trupe Brincante - 3 young residents from Rocinha who were trained by the CIESPI staff, Cristina Laclette Porto, Nathercia Lacerda and Carolina Terra. To learn more about this, consult the report: Early childhood and community action in Rocinha: youth re(discovering) childhoods.

³ Article 28, section 13, Law no. 13.146/2015.

⁴ A quilombo was a settlement of descendants of slaves who formed the communities when they escaped slavery. Most only survived for several years but quilombolas still exist.