

Listen to your children Rocinha!



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Improving Early Childhood Education in Fragile Contexts
International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood
at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro - CIESPI/PUC-Rio, Brazil
Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Scotland
CIESPI Director: Irene Rizzini | Executive Coordinator: Maria Cristina Bó
Authors: Eliane Gomes and Leandro Castro | English translation: Malcolm Bush
Editors: Renata Brasil, Irene Rizzini and Malcolm Bush



In this bulletin we present the voices of early childhood staff in Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro talking about their early childhood learning centers (ECLCs) in the time of Covid and their relationships with the municipality.

This bulletin continues the reporting on the international project Participative and Inclusive Early Childhood Educationⁱ by describing some of the views of early childhood teachers in the Brazil team's target community of Rocinha. The larger project includes conversations with community reference people, key municipal and national actors, parents/family members, children and educators as well as analyses of the research literature, laws, and quantitative data. Bulletin no. 1, 2 and 3 and more details about the project can be found at www.ciespi.org.br.

Introduction

Between April and June 2021, CIESPI staff interviewed four senior staff from the three main types of ECLCs in the community of Rocinha: municipal, private and independent ECLCs acting in partnership with the municipality known as ECLCs *conveniadas*.

The structured questionnaire included items about attendance before and during COVID 19, the centers' strategies for inclusion and participation, the fiscal situation of the centers, and safety inside them.

During the COVID 19 epidemic, ECLCs in Rio were shut down for a long time starting in March 2020. One respondent talked about staff's initial reactions: *In March, in our naivety, we thought we would be shut for a week, two weeks maximum, and then life would return to normal. The pandemic would pass like a rain storm and then the rain would stop.* Contrary to these expectations the ECLCs' staff only

returned in June 2020 and without the children. During this period, they had to create other pedagogical strategies to reach the children and they also offered families support for obtaining food.

ECLCs were not formally re-opened until May 2021 with new conditions for guarding against the spread of the virus. The advances in public health understandings of the virus and the advance in vaccines were fundamental to this re-opening. In the meantime, to the degree possible, strategies were developed by the ECLCs for responding to children and their families at a distance. The development of educational materials that the children could use in their homes and the use of online resources were important tasks during this period.

According to our respondents, these strategies demanded from the teachers rethinking content and the language of communication with lots of creativity and

clarity. They also demanded new technological capacities and financial resources which were not always available to the teachers or the families.

Our interviews with ECLCs staff occurred during the process of re-opening.

Participation

The participation of families with the ECLCs was one of the topics we explored. There was an institutional sense that family participation was important. Pre-covid, families were invited to meetings, events, and activities with the children both when the children first entered a ECLC and for the rest of their attendance. On these occasions, the topics discussed centered around the development of the children and the importance of the participation of parents and responsible adults in the learning process. One teacher summarized it as follows: *Everyone needs this participation. School and the family must speak the same language. School and family must understand each other. We cannot confuse the children in this sense.*

During the pandemic without in-person activities these organizations turned themselves into a new model of learning, distance learning, which demanded the use of different technologies. This meant rethinking the ways in which families could participate in their children's learning by figuring out how to make connections with teachers virtually and by proposing activities that could be carried out in the home.

The teachers we talked with spoke of their deep concern that the children should not be without activities. One respondent emphasized the efforts made to prepare for this situation: *... During the period of the pandemic it was what I told you a constant struggle requiring lots of organization so that the children would not be left without activities.*

We tried to offer every kind of pedagogical support. It was not just a matter of showing up with a piece of paper. We were able to prepare between 12 and 16 students for entry into primary education.

Each of the ECLCs we spoke with proposed activities for the children during this period. Printed materials were developed around a weekly pattern of delivering and receiving materials back. Parents received a proposal for activities together with the materials necessary for the exercises thus avoiding any kind of expense for the families who were already facing many complications caused by the epidemic. In one of the ECLCs, the delivery of educational activities was accompanied by the delivery of donated food.

The educational staff also resorted to the use of digital tools to maintain contact with the children so as not to burden the families by trying to teach them how to be professional teachers. Respondents, however, pointed to issues that prevented families from successfully participating in these virtual activities. These included the lack of technological resources and inexperience in handling these tools.

This situation brought struggles not just for the families but also for ECLC staff who need to adapt to different conditions to plan and execute the activities and to using unfamiliar technical tools.

Despite these difficulties new methods were adopted to provide educational support to the young children isolated in their homes. These included: the creation of a channel on Youtube by the ECLCs conveniadas, the development of individual teaching reports by the private ECLCs and the dissemination of the App *Rio Teaches in the Home* by a municipal network. One of the ECLCs, however, decided not to use these online methods because most families had difficulties accessing the materials. They chose instead to prioritize delivering the activities to parents by hand.

Inclusion

We use the term inclusion in an expanded form considering exclusion for reason of income, gender, ethnicity, location and other personal and social categories. In addition to exclusion from necessary educational resources we define exclusion as the lack of those resources in a community. A child cannot be included if the vital resource does not exist.

One key element of exclusion in Rocinha is the limited number of ECLC slots available. This is an issue from nursery school on. Our respondents pointed to the fact that the physical structures and the pedagogical resources for nursery schools are lacking in Rocinha.

We also sought to understand issues for young children with. On this issue there were differences among different types of ECLCs. In private ECLCs, the decision to offer a place to a child goes through an individual institutional evaluation which verifies the disability and offers or declines a position in dialog with the family. Any help offered to a particular child depends on the resources of the institution, but the possibilities are considered quite limited. If disabilities are identified, the family is invited in for a conversation where it may be pointed out that the family should consult professional advice. At the time of the interview, this private ECLC said it had no students with disabilities.

In the public ECLCs and the ECLCs conveniadas the entry process is carried on through written applications. Any disabilities a child might have are taken into consideration as part of the selection. The key difference between the ECLCs conveniadas and the municipal ECLCs are that the latter have qualified professionals and resources for caring for children with. In Rocinha, for example,

there is a resource room which is designed for children with special educational needs and who need specific stimulation for their development.

The ECLCs conveniadas have limited support for children with disabilities and do not use the resource room in Rocinha. At the time of the interviews, neither of the two ECLCs conveniadas interviewed had a child with disabilities. These ECLCs recognized their lack in this area and said they would like to offer support to these children and to receive external help for them, even volunteer help. Staff at these ECLCs said that the municipality determined a per capita rate for each child in the centers but that the amount was out of line and insufficient, restricting the services they could offer. They stressed that the identification of signs of delay in development or learning were staff perceptions and they, the staff, knew they had to distinguish between individual characteristics of a child and difficulties that might be classified a clinical diagnosis. In such cases, the staff suggested the families consult the health network for a possible diagnosis and treatment. In fact, the services for children with disabilities in Rocinha are very weak which ends up putting more responsibility on the families themselves.

Safety

ECLCs are in general considered safe places for young children. In this consultation we found that the physical structures of ECLCs in Rocinha were safe and were periodically examined by the municipality. The municipal secretariat of education checks on aspects of physical safety, food and sanitation. While the private ECLCs are monitored that happens in a less formal way.

However, there are a variety of factors that impact the safety of ECLCs in the community.

The precarious supply of potable water, basic cleaning of public space, the constant exposure to violence and the use of firearms were identified as elements which profoundly impact the health and the quality of life for young children in Rocinha.

All the local ECLCs we interviewed independent of their mode of organization, had experienced threats to their functioning by lack of water and by the frequent incidents of armed conflict. In the case of two of the ECLCs, they had experienced closures for these reasons. The lack of water affected the use of bathrooms, the kitchens and lunchrooms. When shooting started between police and drug traffickers or between traffickers it was impossible to maintain the safety of children and staff. If shooting started when the children were in the ECLC the staff immediately employed safety protocols. Both the municipal ECLCs and the ECLCs *conveniadas* had such formal protocols.

COVID was also a threat to safety. Both staff and families were given instructions on various prevention measures and protocols for slowing the spread of the pandemic. But we should note the constraints on the community on account of the difficulty of following rules on hand washing because of lack of water, soap and alcohol gel and the use of masksⁱⁱ.

When the return to in-person learning started, the ECLCs adopted new routines. They organized a rotation of classes to reduce the number of children attending each day and established limits on the number of people in the lunch areas. The municipality conditioned the re-opening on the adoption of more demanding sanitation and hygiene conditions. The private ECLCs had to pay for these demands with their own funds while the ECLCs *conveniadas* had to use funds from their per-diem payments. The public or municipal ECLCs resorted to cleaning services contracted by the municipal government.

During the interviews, our respondents talked about financial insecurity which was always a factor that impacted the functioning of ECLCs but which was aggravated during the pandemic. The ECLCs *conveniadas* suffered from late payments from the municipality and from a 25% reduction in the amount they received when in person learning was bannedⁱⁱⁱ. The private ECLCs saw their monthly incomes dramatically reduced because of the increase in unemployment and the financial instability of the families they served. These ECLCs said it was necessary for them to seek extra financial help to support the educational activities need to maintain contact with their families even at a distance.

...We continued to work but it was difficult because people sometimes felt shame to come here and not contribute anything.

The ECLCs with the greatest financial difficulties had to fire staff and seek donations and/or bank loans. In the case of the public ECLCs, staff with the appropriate qualifications had guaranteed employment and maintained their positions and pay but their 13th payments were interrupted.^{iv}

Food insecurity was stressed in the interviews as being one of the consequences of COVID 19 that most affected the families. Hunger touched children, their families and the staff of ECLCs who had been laid off or suffered late or reduced payments. A staff member said: *It really impacted us and from the moment we started to suffer late payments which we didn't when we had normal payments. Then we could pay our bills, and we could pay our staff. I particularly because my husband was unemployed. In the house we lacked food we lacked other things. If the church had not helped what then?*

Children who counted on the guaranteed and regular food from school and who lost that clearly had their rights violated. The ECLCs still offered whatever help they could with the help of donations of food

supplies and the federal food card but this help was insufficient to meet the need in the community. The ECLCs *conveniadas* which started off as community ECLCs were the first to use solidarity networks and local groups to guarantee a source of food for children as they maintained close relations with the community and knew the community struggles and the struggles of each of their families.

Final considerations

Access to safe and inclusive educational spaces is a child's right and for this reason understanding the role of ECLCs in care, education, and development is a crucial part of our project. COVID massively impacted these institutions particularly during the period of distance learning.

During this round of interviews in Rocinha we realized that the families' interactions with ECLCs were complicated by distance learning and by limited access to reliable internet services and adequate equipment. Unequal access to decent quality public services impacts the development of young children especially at a time when millions of families are suffering from unemployment and financial instability and new social and emotional challenges. While the

epidemic challenged the ECLCs and the families, the shortage of ECLC slots was a chronic problem before the outbreak and there is a longstanding demand for more public ECLCs and more ECLC slots.

As we did our interviews, we asked ECLC staff what else could contribute to the education and the development of young children in the community. The first issue mentioned was strengthening the legitimization and understanding of ECLCs as places for child development and learning as well as for basic care. As one staff member said: *Something that I think is that very few people think...Its that a ECLC is not exclusively a place to leave your children and go to work. A ECLC is a place of education.*

Another key point was the issue of children with disabilities with the need for either professional or volunteer diagnosis. Lastly, the private ECLCs have an interest in establishing a dialogue with public and educational spaces in Rocinha so that there is greater contact with the municipal administration and knowledge about the array of services available for young children in the community.

If you have further interest in these issues and would like to assist the project please contact us at ciespi@ciespi.org.br or through WhatsApp: 21 98266 7045.

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ⁱⁱ The World Health Organization recommended the use of masks for people from the age of 12. For children 5 to 11 their individual capacities needed to be taken into account. <https://aps.bvs.br/aps/qual-e-a-recomendacao-para-uso-de-mascaras-por-criancas/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Association of ECLCs and Pre-Schools *Conveniadas*, Religious, Communal and Philanthropic of the city of Rio de Janeiro (ACREPERJ) is an important alliance of these institutions and was mentioned in the interviews. Among its roles was negotiating the reduction of financial support during the epidemic, delays in installment payments and the reduction in per-diem rates.

^{iv} Under Brazilian labor law, workers in the formal labor sector receive an extra monthly payment in December known as the 13th.



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