

# Listen to your children Rocinha!



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Improving Early Childhood Education in Fragile Contexts  
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In prior bulletins<sup>1</sup>, we have written about parents and school staff's views on how to increase educational opportunities for young children in our target community of Rocinha. Readers of those bulletins will know that Rocinha is a community in the city of Rio de Janeiro with some 150,000 residents and high degrees of poverty and of violence. It is also a community with a vibrant small business life and blessed with about 30 early childhood centers for children 0-3. In this bulletin we report on how key community actors see the issue. We interviewed 16 community people in a variety of fields: social assistance and the Brazilian System for Guaranteeing Rights, health, education, sports, culture, religion, communications and social movements. This variety of organizations demonstrates the positive forces in Rocinha.

## Activities for small children in Rocinha

Our respondents say there were free activities for children in Rocinha but the families needed to know about them and their hours and rules. The hours might be a barrier as parents had to figure out how to take the children safely in a steep hillside community where traffic is chaotic and transit is difficult. **“Six years and under and the child needs to be accompanied by a parent. But we have fathers who leave for work at five in the morning and mothers too.”** The geography and size of Rocinha are such that even if you live in the community, you need bus transit to get to places which means costs for the family. But the respondents said there were organizations in the community that contributed to the education and care of children including sports, music, games, health and education, with access to books and toys, meeting places, religious institutions and others but none of them knew how many children 0-5 attended. Because of the complexity of the community and the lack of investment in the collection and systemization of data it was difficult to be sure about the use and availability of services.

Community residents had little participation in the planning of these activities although the organizations said they were open to suggestions. Only three organizations had a specific strategy for listening to residents and encouraging the participation of families in planning. **“One gives an importance to parents which often they don't know they have.”** Knowing the limits and the possibilities of families is fundamental for responding to the demands of the children and for helping referral to and improving services at the system for the guarantee of rights. Respondents said that when they do reach out, organizations have in person or virtual meetings with welcoming environments and appropriate language. We highlight two that aim their outreach at mothers who have the major responsibility for children and two that use special ways of listening to children about the programs.

Nine of the organizations interviewed said they could not actually serve all the families who sought out their services. There were institutional and financial limits to expanding their programs such as physical infrastructure, lack of material and equipment, insufficient numbers of trained staff, and the importance of maintaining class size small enough to guarantee quality, individual attention. Services for children 0-5 were particularly limited. But individuals showed interest in providing or increasing the service for this group but said that they would need more resources and the help of specialists to prepare their approach. **“We have a very strong inclination for this topic. For a long time, we wanted to construct and foment a debate about early childhood in Rocinha from the perspective of understanding the rights of the children<sup>2</sup>.”**

As for cooperation between different initiatives and the early childhood educational centers, there did not appear to be ongoing strategies that would make this possible. While respondents realized the importance of this cooperation, it only happened in the area of health. Many parents need to access a variety of services for their children and strengthening the relationships among various staffs and professionals would help families understand how to obtain help. Two respondents suggested the idea of putting together an information system about relevant public policies. **“We tend to think that in the case of mental health a child just has a disorder. And forget that she could also benefit from sport as well as therapy.”**

## Inclusion

The group as a whole thought that many young children in Rocinha were deprived of educational opportunities. There were not enough early childhood educational spots for the demand. The waiting lists were large and the hours of the centers at odds with the reality of work hours and parent travel time. The situation was worse for babies with too few public

places and not enough resources for the nonprofit centers to maintain quality and keep up with the demand. Private centers were beyond the means of many families. The result was inequality. ***“These children are already born running behind others. In the competition they are not on the same foot of equality.”***

These problems are especially severe for children with disabilities or mental health problems. The absence of special assistants in the classroom, and the demand for parents to be present to look after the children result in families withdrawing. ***“A mother does not know how to deal with her, including the difficulties of understanding who is a child on the spectrum and who is a child who hangs loose. A mother prefers to take her child out of school because there are always complaints and she doesn’t know what to do.”*** While some parents must try hard to keep their children in school, others have not learned the value of education said some respondents because they didn’t have access to education when they were young.

But education is not only what happens in school. Children learn daily in their interactions with adults and other children. So, spaces which promote these interactions are fundamental. In Rocinha there is one abandoned park but no places where mothers and their children can meet and where children can play and run in safety. ***“In the community you need physical spaces which don’t exist because of the unbridled development. You don’t have small square or playground equipment; you cannot ride a bike, or use roller blades. In reality the space of the community is a dormitory. Rocinha is a large dormitory.”***

Rocinha requires a movement to share information. Expanding the dialogue about the spaces that offer activities including nonprofits, social and religious spaces and the social protection networks would increase the information available and facilitate access for families. The emergency protection of the various state agencies is crucial but they also have an important role in advertising and strengthening the services in the region for children and their families.

The violation of rights and lack of access to public services got worse during the Covid-19 epidemic and all the respondents said that the opportunities for inclusion were reduced. Using online resources was not an option for everyone. ***“They had to choose whether to have the internet or food... it was harmful and this affected many children in school.”*** Some children were older starting school and others had their schooling interrupted with the closing of schools. Food insecurity and hunger increased because many children got their main meals in the schools. The public sector was overwhelmed by children who left private sector schools because of the reduction of family income. ***“This pandemic was not democratic. It affected a group in society, the poor and those living in favelas.”***

Poverty interferes with children’s access to education because public services are insufficient or too precarious for those who lack the resources to live in safe houses, acquire learning materials or have

access to adequate nutrition. ***“If you don’t have food, you cannot reason... with hunger you cannot do anything.”*** But, according to one respondent, income does not define if a child has the capacity to learn. ***“I think that poverty interferes when it prevents things happening but it does not interfere with the capacity to learn.”***

But it is not just the difference in income that creates inequality. Respondents saw some children being treated differently in Rocinha because of race, ethnicity and gender, having some form of disability or illness, the location of the home, and family arrangements. ***“Here there are many social differences. There are areas in which children don’t have sanitation, or a bathroom.”*** Also treated differently are the poorest children who live with hunger, with situations of violence, who are out of school and who are not cared for by their parents. Children were also treated with prejudice if their parents abuse alcohol or drugs, whose caregivers were a gay couple, or had health problems. We should emphasize the issue of racism. ***“I think that the locale reinforces the question of race because Rocinha has this mixed-race perspective, it is a huge mixture. So, I think there are a lot of stereotypes, especially about dark-colored children, when you walk down the street and see children on the street and most of them are dark-colored boys.”***

Our respondents were asked what would support children at home, in the community and in schools. Among their replies were dialoguing with families, respecting and welcoming their varied compositions, getting to understand the behavior of children, having staff to provide services in the family, dealing with the precariousness and absence of services, and being aware of the housing conditions, basic sanitation, education and the absence of places for children to play. But substantial resources would be necessary to ameliorate those issues. While collective and local initiatives are fundamental, they cannot eliminate the negative effects of the actions of the State which prioritize armed intervention in the favelas or peripheral communities.

## Participation

A majority of our respondents said that parents and parent figures participated in their children’s education and learning because they believed an education would guarantee better life conditions for their children. ***“The great majority worry about this a great deal as in ‘My child will have what I did not have. I struggle, I grit my teeth, I spend hours in my boss’s kitchen but my son will not end up doing this’.”***

The parents searched for early childhood places, went to meetings, got interested in their children’s performance and tried to find a coach when needed. On the other hand, not every parent could participate. ***“A father who works in a restaurant will rarely be able to come with his child to go to a sporting or cultural event.”*** Employers rarely understood that an employee needed to go to a meeting or an event at school or that the child was ill and needed attention. Improving conditions of work, reducing work hours,

and increasing wages could facilitate participation. As long as this does not happen, many children will have to be under the care of “creche mothers”, neighbors or family members including minors while the parents work. This network of support is very important and prevents children being home alone or wandering alone in the streets.

Respondents thought that participation must be stimulated and promoted by the schools through meetings and other activities which pay attention to the families’ work commitments. Other ideas were offering courses, the cooperative production of toys, educational activities which could be done at home, travelling events in different areas of Rocinha including in the alleys<sup>3</sup>, having parents rescue their childhood toys to share with their children, encouraging parents to get involved in actions about their housing, improving the dialogue with parents about the importance of education, and offering mental health support to families especially to those mothers who suffer from double shifts and those who live in situations of domestic violence.

Most of our respondents talked about the need for increased public sector investments in early childhood education centers, to improve their structures and maintenance, to construct new schools and increase the number of places, and to contract with and train teachers incorporating local knowledge recruiting teachers who live in the community. ***“So, o.k. you have a curriculum which you must follow but you need to construct material specifically for children in these communities to discuss various things: including the debate about safety, freedom, leisure all these things that are present in this place.”***

### Safety

Most of the respondents did not think that children aged 0-5 lived in safety in Rocinha. But they added that this was true of other areas of the city of Rio. Violent police operations, the sale and abuse of drugs, child labor, the lack of basic sanitation, limited access to health services, education and transport, and food insecurity and hunger were among the elements which violated the rights of children on a daily basis.

It is not possible in Rocinha to escape the risk of stray bullets, although for some years there have not been major armed conflict among drug traffickers. The rules imposed by the drug traffickers repress some

forms of violence against children but do not stop them all from happening. For children who live in families connected to the drug trade, the confrontation with armed state forces can generate trauma.

It is a reality that young children circulate on the streets alone. Some ask for food and money and some are along during the night. There are not safe squares for they have been destroyed or used by people who abuse alcohol or other drugs, or engage in prostitution.

What will improve the situation are that local and external actors offer better access to health, education, the redistributions of income, social and emotional support and strengthening local networks. Some respondents mentioned the impact of structural racism.

Although complete safety did not exist in any area the respondents talked about spaces that offered some safety for children including the home. But young children were safer in early childhood educational centers than they were at home alone. Other safe spaces were the library, the sports complex, the Guardianship Council, the health and social assistance centers and religious places.

### Final considerations

Children learn everywhere they circulate and when they are with adults and peers. Children learn in playgrounds and Rocinha lacks these. Lack of public services and resources of all kinds are major issues. Specialized health care is lacking. Young children are not a priority in the social assistance system. The police take a bellicose approach to crime which exposes children to gun fire. ***“It is not healthy for a child to know about violence which he does when he is in a favela, to be faced with violence, to have visual access to things which a child should not experience.”***

In general, the respondents did not think that the rights of the residents including young children could be assured without investment and without policies and public services for this population being increased and prioritized.

This bulletin is the last in the series on the project that focuses on the interviews carried out in Rocinha in 2020. Anyone seeking more information about this initiative should contact CIESPI by email at [ciespi@ciespi.org.br](mailto:ciespi@ciespi.org.br) or by WhatsApp at 21 98266 7045.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that in Brazil, children’s policy goals of very often couched in terms of rights.

<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of homes in Rocinha are accessible only through alleys or concrete stairways.