



Listen to your children Rocinha! And Jardim Catarina as well!



Project Bulletin No. 1, April 2021. Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy
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

Director: Irene Rizzini | Executive Coordinator: Maria Cristina Bó

Authors: Eliane Gomes and Leandro Castro, with the participation of Antonio Carlos Firminoⁱ

Editors: Renata Brasil, Irene Rizzini and Malcolm Bush

This is the first bulletin of the project UKRI GCRF Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy: Improving Early Childhood Education in Fragile Contexts. The project aims to contribute to debates and actions to improve the education of children 0 to 5 years old in low-income communities in Brazil.

While the project involves working with government agencies, interested citizens and organizations and early childhood staff, it is grounded in two communities, Rocinha in the city of Rio de Janeiro and Jardim Catarina in São Gonçalo both of which are in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

This international project with research sites in four countries is coordinated by the Childhood and Youth Studies Research Group, University of Edinburgh in Scotlandⁱⁱ. Kay Tisdall is the principal investigator in Scotland and the project in Brazil is coordinated by Professor Irene Rizzini, Department of Social Work, PUC-Rio and director of CIESPI. More information about the project and the staff can be found at www.ciespi.org.brⁱⁱⁱ.

Consulting with the community

This bulletin reports on the project's initial consultation with the communities of Rocinha and Jardim Catarina^{iv}. The consultation focused on the impact of COVID 19 on young children and their families and initiatives in the community aimed at those children. Between September and December 2020, we talked with people who work in the communities about the challenges of caring for and working with young children with particular regard to the current challenging times. The COVID pandemic has aggravated prior social and economic inequalities throughout the world and especially in low-income communities. The pandemic has provoked fear, uncertainty, anger and sadness. And the consequent stress has impacted mental health including that of children.

Family incomes have diminished considerably especially in families with children^v. In consequence, food insecurity and hunger have increased. In low-income areas, social distance and limited access to reliable internet, computers

and cell phones have made young children's access to education difficult at a time when all public creches and pre-schools and many private ones are closed. The shortage and poor quality of hospitals and health clinics became more evident. But the Unified Health System (SUS) in Brazil through its clinics provided health care and access to vaccinations when the supply of vaccinations permitted.

It became apparent that the precarious nature of daily existence could kill. Small and overcrowded homes increase the spread of the disease and also make the isolation of an infected family member very difficult. Health problems are exacerbated by the lack of access to water and basic sanitation in some homes. Sometimes in the struggle to survive the educational needs of the youngest children are put to the side.

On the other hand, we became aware of community resistance. We saw local movements and organizations embrace the banner of "ourselves for ourselves" to help families, friends

and neighbors. And these efforts occurred without government help.

Current research on COVID which, while it is advancing all the time, still has many unknowns suggests that very young children, while a few can get very sick from the disease, are less at risk than older children and adults^{vi}. But the pandemic poses other challenges. Children are affected by social isolation and being confined in the home. If domestic violence occurs it is very difficult to contact traditional sources of help and support since these places have been closed. Many children cannot be with their friends or do not have the space to play inside the home. They are cut off from the activities and stimulation that promotes their development. While Brazil is proving better than many nations for its system of actually giving vaccinations, it is suffering difficulties in the supply of vaccines largely because of the dangerous policies and rhetoric of the national government. In addition, many women no longer have access to pre-natal care.

We know that the first years of life are vital for human development. So, we invite you to listen to the struggles around caring for children especially in times of pandemic in our two communities.

Rocinha and Jardim Catarina

Rocinha is in the southern zone of the city of Rio. It is considered the largest favela in the country with an official population of 69,000 inhabitants though this is considered an undercount^{vii}. Residents place the figure higher pointing to the considerable transient population. The official number of children 0-6 is 8,026^{viii}. The lack of basic sanitation in some homes, the poor garbage pick-up, open sewers in some streets, and the huge problem of ventilation in narrow alleys and passages create a dangerous environment for the spread of infectious diseases. In January 2021, this community had the third highest number of COVID cases in the city^{ix}.

Jardim Catarina is located in the Monjolos region of the municipality of São Gonçalo. It has 73,000 inhabitants of whom about 6,620 are children 0-6^x. Like Rocinha, the community suffers problems with infrastructure especially an insufficient

coverage of water and sewage systems. Other problems include inadequate education, health, and transit services and armed violence. Conditions have worsened because of COVID-19 and in early 2020 the community had 2,247 cases of Covid^{xi}.

What the respondents said: the impact of COVID

Residents of both communities have had their lives altered in a number of ways by the pandemic. Many children have had their mental health affected with the fear of getting sick and the end of in-person schooling. Then there is the strain of staying at home while still taking preventive measures.

My godson is three and a half and has a very inquiring mind asking everyone questions. He was terrified. He cannot go out without a mask. He remembers better than the responsible adults. I reckon that this kid is already growing with the word fear, death, distance, no hugs, don't get close, don't get near your mother^{xii}.

The main concerns of the adults about themselves had to do with the loss of income consequent to unemployment. Many families have seen their incomes diminish or disappear. In addition, many adults mentioned the difficulty of accessing such benefits as unemployment payments.

In both communities, local initiatives to help families cope were essential. In Rocinha, efforts to reduce the impact of the pandemic came from the residents themselves and their internal and external support systems^{xiii}. These networks consulted with the residents, collected resources and organized the distribution of the resources throughout the community. Health professionals contributed to these efforts and assisted the distribution of masks, alcohol gel, hygiene and cleaning products, and basic food baskets.

In Jardim Catarina efforts to distribute food and hygiene products were not organized collectively and so were random. The community did not feel listened to and some of the respondents could not

identify any community action of the kind reported in Rocinha.

Respondents in both communities said that government action was ineffective and insufficient to respond to their requests. They were not consulted about their urgent needs. As an example, when community sinks were installed in Rocinha (many houses do not have or have inadequate running water), the municipality paid no attention to the chronic water shortage and so the majority of the newly installed public sinks did not function. The same incompetence was seen in the distribution of food purchase cards to families with children in the municipal schools. The families were not given basic information and had difficulty accessing the benefit^{xiv}. In Jardim Catarina, according to residents, creches had difficulties getting the basic food baskets and thus ensuring their local distribution.

Just as important was the lack of information about the pandemic. Our respondents said it was difficult to get safety gear. In Jardim Catarina, using masks and social isolation were seen as a struggle because people did not believe these measures would reduce the spread of the virus.

The closing of creches and schools was a huge struggle for families. Parents who had support networks could leave children in the care of other parents or neighbors. Private tutors were an alternative in Rocinha for those who could pay^{xv}. At the time of the interviews a number of private creches were operating with a reduced number of children but extended hours^{xvi}.

What the residents said: initiatives aimed at young children

Neither community paid much attention to the needs of young children. Respondents referred to the lack of spaces for outdoor recreation; the shortage of slots in creches and preschools; the absence of specialized services for young children and the simple lack of information about activities and projects for young children. What leisure spaces existed were badly cared for. Children were exposed to accidents and to violence when they played in the streets, the alleys and gangways. The community creches were essential before COVID

and some continued operating after the beginning of the pandemic, but those were not getting their contracted payments from the municipality after the beginning of the pandemic. What did exist were some health services, religious initiatives, public libraries, a few open areas and a few music schools. But the sum total of these were considered insufficient for the needs of the community. And while Rocinha reported these activities, the residents of Jardim Catarina reported their absence.

A resident summed up the struggle to think about the rights and needs of young children:

When you think about young children... you think about early childhood as a whole... There must be a group of policies which gives support to early childhood. Here in São Gonçalo when you talk about early childhood people think about the community creches... For a long time we have tried to wake the city up for an early childhood policy which includes health, education, recreation and everything.

Creches and their representative organizations exercise a crucial role in the community^{xvii}. In addition, in Rocinha, the Center for the Creation of Popular Images (CECIP), the Popular Movement Advisory Center (CAMPO) and the international Center for Research and Policy on Childhood (CIESPI) contribute to the struggle. They advise childcare centers and undertake studies and projects which help spread information and assist actions aimed at the development of children. CAMPO also operates in Jardim Catarina.

This first bulletin shows similarities and differences in the early childhood context in the two communities. But this is just a beginning. We wish to enter conversations with other residents, professional and interested parties. If you wish to take part in this conversation please contact us by email at primeirainfanciaciespi@gmail.com or whatsapp at 98266 7045.

Notes

ⁱ English translation by Malcolm Bush (CIESPI/PUC-Rio).

ⁱⁱ The support of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) is gratefully acknowledged.

ⁱⁱⁱ The international project website is <https://www.ed.ac.uk/education/rke/centres-groups/childhood-and-youth-studies-research-group/research/sipp>.

^{iv} We conducted nine interviews, four in Rocinha and five in Jardim Catarina. They included telephone, internet and in-person interviews. The interviews contained ten questions and with the respondents' permission they were taped.

^v Fifty-five percent of the population of Brazil have seen their incomes decrease during the pandemic. Sixty-three percent of families with children aged 0-17 have had reduced incomes (UNICEF. Impactos Primários e Secundários da Covid-19 em crianças e adolescentes – Relatório de Análise - 1ª onda, 2020).

^{vi} The “Guide to mental health during the pandemic in Brazil” (RODHE, 2020) suggests that diagnosed cases of COVID among children and young people are about one to five percent of the total number of cases and that the majority of these young people exhibit none or mild symptoms. A few children, however, have become very sick.

^{vii} This figure comes from the Census Bureau's 2010 Census (IBGE. 2010). But in the same year the state counted its population as 73,410 but with an estimate of 98,391 due to refusals and homes not reached ([PAC Rocinha Domiciliar Final 16032010.xls \(ciespi.org.br\)](#)).

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Boletim epidemiológico do Centro de Operações de Emergência da Prefeitura, 22 January, 2021.

^x Bureau of the Census (IBGE) 2010.

^{xi} Public data about Covid-19 in São Gonçalo, provided by the Division of Epidemiology in the municipality.

^{xii} The quotations in this text come from people who either live and/or work in one of the two communities. We omit their names to safeguard their privacy.

^{xiii} These networks included associations, collectives, nonprofits, creches, nonprofits, universities, and religious, cultural, artistic and sport initiatives.

^{xiv} Source: G1 notícias, 2020. [Famílias de alguns alunos ainda não têm acesso a auxílio alimentação prometido pela Prefeitura do Rio | Rio de Janeiro | G1 \(globo.com\)](#).

^{xv} Private tutor does not indicate the reality. In low-income communities there are people called “explicadoras” or literally explainer who help children with homework while also caring for them. There are also “cuidadores” or caretakers who will look after a group of children after school.

^{xvi} As of this writing, COVID infection rates have got out of control in much of Brazil and certainly in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The state ordered a ‘public holiday’ from March 26 until April 4, 2021, Easter Sunday, as a form of lockdown.

^{xvii} In Rocinha the Association of Creches and Preschools Associated with the Confessional Communities and Philanthropies in Rio de Janeiro (ACREPERJ) is the principal association of associated creches or those which act in concert with the city. It counts as members 120 of the 180 associated creches in the city. In Jardim Catarina the Community Association of Rosângela Angelo represents the associated creches and has 34 member creches. These associations work for better management conditions in creches and better qualified staff.

