

“Childhood Culture House”

Only 20 per cent of Brazil’s 14 million children in early childhood have access to child care institutions and over 45 per cent of children at this age come from the poorest families. Sadly for Brazil’s children the chances of living in poverty are greatly increased depending of the darkness of their skin or location of their family; it is especially prevalent in rural areas. This is a historic problem which is changing, but again slowly. Early childhood, care and education have only recently been integrated for all in the country. In short child development in Brazil is still incredibly unequal.

As a federal state, the role of the government is to set general principles and guidelines, leaving education authorities (26 states, or the multitude of municipalities) to implement them. Therefore there is a big diversity between each municipality, especially an inequality in social and economic conditions. With such an inequality existing in education, it is little wonder play provision is not considered relevant by many authorities. Early childhood care and education services are integrated but this model still has many difficulties. Public education programs begin from 3yrs old children and some even offer child day care while their parents are working.

On the other hand, middle class children are under pressure to succeed in school, and attend many extra-curricular activities to increase their chances of getting into the best universities. These children have less freedom to make their own choices. In many cases they approach adulthood with low creativity, or autonomy. They become dependent on others, losing their childhood and the chance to discover their individuality.

Parents are pressured to buy the best they can for their children and respond to the fear generated by the need for their children to succeed. This competitive culture results in added stress to children with a clear increase in symptoms such as: depression, obesity, self-harm, violence and low social solidarity.

After decades without the due value, the importance of play in child development is starting to be recognized in Brazil. However, the actual public policy still does not focus properly on the rights of children. The high cost of books, art materials and toys coupled with poorly trained providers, or traditional mind-sets have also limited cultural access to many parts of the population, especially the child.

Recognising that children need more opportunities to produce their own culture, IPA Brasil, in partnership with “Despertar” Community Association, located in Campanha, a very traditional city in the country side of Minas Gerais state, implemented the project “**Solar dos Querubins**” as a “House of Childhood Culture”. The main goal of this project is the strengthening of cultural access for children and families. Through such things as literature, art and play, “**Solar**” can increase the knowledge about the importance of childhood culture in the community, emphasise their expression, their involvement, providing a social life consciousness.

To realise this project with a sustainable approach we are using strategies such as:

- Discover the history of the house its relationship with the city’s culture.
- Raising awareness in a variety of sectors: Entrepreneurs (Commerce Association of Campanha), Politicians (Mayor, Directors of Culture, Education, Health and Social services, members of the City Hall), Law and Human Rights representatives (Prosecutor) and community members.
- Organizing a variety of income generating and free to access play visits, for individual families and community groups.

Play and cultural activities are developed outdoor and indoor, including a library, a playroom, workshops and a city farm in the backyard. For parents, professionals, young people and others interested, we offer: playwork training courses, multicultural events, traditional and regional games workshops. Community participation is increasing due to school visits, family play sessions and public events in public spaces of the city.

The implementation of the “Solar dos Querubins” as a “Childhood Culture House” showed that it is possible to create a sustainable model for play projects/ childhood culture in Brazil, with the participation of the local community from urban and rural areas, public resources and children and young people’s participation. We believe the space “Solar” may offer a new model to support the inclusion of play based projects in Brazilian public policy. Since “Solar” opened, for example, many people have contacted us with a view to creating a similar experience in other cities.

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Reference: “Caring and Learning Together” – UNESCO- Paris-2010

São Paulo, Brazil, 24/06/2011