

**Multi country, multi ethnic research on the rights of children in early childhood:
opportunities and challenges for using both the process and the outcomes for policy
development and advocacy**

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Theme

- Cross-country approaches to child well-being and indicators

Subtheme

- Rights of children and adolescents

Summary of the panel

Theme: This panel examines the realities of engaging in multi-country research in four countries on the degree to which key children's rights are realized in low-income communities which suffer challenges such as violence, poor health, and lack of resources. The countries are Brazil, South Africa, Eswatini and Palestine. The panel touches on the advantages of such research but also the challenges of comparative methodologies and definitions, powerful cultural differences and different political realities for promoting change. It also examines quantitatively and qualitatively the extent of poverty and the ways in which that poverty impacts children's rights. Finally, it looks at the gaps between global and national rights policies and the realities in low-income communities. It also considers the contribution of community members as actors and agents of change in their local contexts. The panel relates to the major conference themes of the rights of children, poverty, inequality and child welfare research, child well-being developmental practices, cross country approaches to child-well-being and indicators, and the impacts of COVID-19 on childhood. It also relates to the conference sub-themes of children's participation and voices, poverty and deprivation, and early childhood education.

Objectives: The main research question and study objective is to discover the reality of children's rights as they relate to early childhood development in low-income, poor urban neighborhoods which are subject to intense violence.

Methods: This is a four-country study concentrating on policies and practices on the rights of children 0-5 in four low-income communities in Brazil, Palestine, Eswatini, and South Africa. The panel also includes a presentation from the host country, Scotland. The study includes:

1. An analysis of the laws and policies in each country on children's rights especially as they impact the context for early childhood development in the four countries.
2. An analysis of the context of the four low-income communities including demographic data, the provision of early childhood opportunities including early childhood centers, and the opportunities and threats to early childhood development in each.

3. In each country one or more host organizations in the study community assist the research.
4. The study includes individual interviews and focus groups separately with early childhood providers, parents, children, key community stakeholders and key policy stakeholders.

Findings: The study points to the difficulty early childhood centers had providing quality care before COVID and the increased difficulties during the pandemic; the general lack of concern with implementing key children's rights; the importance of local action and organization in combatting the problems that impact young children; the role of research in encouraging and connecting local actors; the cultural interpretations and challenges to cross national research; creative methods for listening to young children and their parents; and the importance of promoting early childhood well-being at the municipal and national levels.

Implications: The study teams are still thinking through implications but the research points to the importance of looking at early childhood issues from the local level and not just from national policy.

Paper 1

Title: Inclusion and participation to improve early childhood learning in Brazil: How does the life in low-income communities, challenge theory and research?

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Theme: The sparse implementation of children's rights and the impact on educational opportunities for children 0-5 for Brazilian low-income communities is examined. Brazilian laws and regulations on children's rights are comprehensive, but implementation is sketchy. The particular rights examined are inclusion and participation. Inclusion is extended beyond traditional definitions to encompass whether resources young children need actually exist. Participation includes the participation of parents. Examinations of implementation of children's rights often begin with an analysis of state level action. Brazil currently has a presidential administration openly hostile to human rights. For this reason, we emphasize how the early childhood context and children's rights appear to key actors at the community level. The paper covers major conference themes of the impacts of COVID-19, poverty and poor communities, child welfare research, inequality and children's indicators. It also includes the sub-themes of poverty and deprivation, children's participation and early childhood education.

Objectives: The study objective is to discover how key children's rights vital to early childhood development appear to key actors in a low-income community and their priorities and strategies for implementing those rights.

Methods: This study analyses Brazilian legal and policy guarantees for children's rights and how they play out in reality in a low-income community in Rio de Janeiro. The analysis is embedded in key children's indicators both nationally and locally.

1. The paper summarizes Brazilian laws and practices on children's rights that directly impact early childhood development.
2. It sketches demographic, social and economic characteristics of the study neighborhood Rocinha, the largest single low-income community in Brazil, located in the city of Rio de Janeiro, and how those factors impact young children.
3. The study includes interviews and focus groups with key community stakeholders, parents, staff of creches and pre-schools in the community, and children.
4. The younger child interviews are conducted by visually enhanced methods developed by CIESPI.
5. The study contains a mini-experiment where neighborhood youth are given training in early childhood and then participate in children's on-line and in person play and learning sessions connected to local organizations.

Findings: The majority of children aged 5 upwards attend pre-schools. Attendance of young children in creches is lower. There is strong evidence of a shortage of slots and resources to provide quality care. Parents and early childhood staff have different notions of their roles. COVID 19 exacerbated the pressures on low-income parents. The municipality was slow to respond to basic human needs. The gap was partly filled by the child care centers and other community organizations. Community activists were pleased to be consulted on the research as they saw themselves as often isolated and particularly isolated during the pandemic. Drug trafficker, militia and police violence colored many aspects of the developmental chances for children as did poverty.

Implications: Resources for early childhood development and parents' participation in their children's learning need strengthening as does the involvement of the local community in establishing priorities for children's rights.

Paper 2

Title: What does it mean to have safe, inclusive and participative pedagogy for young children?

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Theme: This paper is part of the panel ‘Multi country, multi-ethnic research on the rights of children in early childhood’. It thus addresses the major conference themes of the rights of child poverty, inequality and child welfare research, child well-being developmental practices, cross country approaches to child-well-being and indicators, and the impacts of COVID-19 on childhood. It relates to the conference sub-themes of children’s participation and voices, poverty and deprivation, and early childhood education.

Objectives: The panel arises from the UKRI GCRF funded project ‘Safe, Inclusive and Participative Pedagogy’. The project explores the reality of children’s rights as they relate to early childhood development in low-income, poor urban neighborhoods which are subject to intense violence. This paper concentrates on the meanings of and intersections between children’s human rights, disability and inclusion, safety and poverty, and early childhood.

Methods: This project concentrates on policies and practices on the rights of children aged 0-5 in four low-income communities in Brazil, Eswatini, Palestine, and South Africa. This paper will draw upon two aspects of the project’s methods: comparative policy analysis nationally of the four country/ regional contexts (drawing on Bacchi’s discourse analysis and Kagan’s system approach). Second, fieldwork within and with the communities has emerging findings from young children, their parents, early years service providers, and other community stakeholders, on the project’s key concepts. Methods include ethnographic observation, local mapping, interviews and focus groups using participatory methods with a minimum, in each community, of 30 children and their family members; 20 service providers; 20 community stakeholders.

Findings: The policy analysis has been undertaken; the community fieldwork is mid-way. Emerging findings are:

- All contexts have policies promoting children’s human rights, early childhood education and child protection. The policies do not regularly intersect to address all aspects of safe, participative and inclusive pedagogy.
- In policies, the particular inclusion of young children in participation rights is not articulated and early childhood policies do not consistently articulate young children’s rights.

- From the community fieldwork, COVID-19 has led to policy responses that have often side-lined children's rights and exacerbated existing inequalities in terms of poverty, digital exclusion, and lack of access to services. Further, they have detrimentally impacted on women's employment and thus income, drawing out the relational demands for children's rights to be realized.
- COVID-19 restrictions have increased violence within family households. Community safety remains or has increased as a significant barrier to children's early childhood learning. While early childhood education policies may consider more individualized child protection and health and safety within their services, these broader systems and community issues of violence are not integrated into the policies and thus service implementation.

Implications: Findings so far point to the importance of looking at the early childhood context from the local level, to challenge national policies to better recognise children's rights to safe, inclusive and participative services within their communities, and community change is particularly possible using community resources and policy levers for sustainable and effective early learning opportunities.

Paper 3

Title: The rights of children in early childhood: opportunities and challenges for research and advocacy in a South African case study community

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Thematic importance and problem: South Africa is a grossly unequal country, historically burdened by poverty characterised along racial lines. Government has prioritised ECD as an avenue for reducing inequality by improving care, nutrition and learning outcomes especially for the most disadvantaged. The country has a well-developed early childhood policy and legislative framework underpinned by the UNCRC and aligned with international best practice. Policy has been informed by predominantly high-income country studies and interpretations of the UNCRC. Yet young children and parents' lived experiences reflect vastly different economic, infrastructural, and socio-cultural goals for young children. Gaps and exclusions in policy implementation are evident. Despite a policy nod to the importance of indigenous knowledge and the primacy of parent and child participation, opportunities for them to meaningfully input into policy and practice are scarce.

Objectives: This study uses the lens of safety, inclusion, and participation in early learning environments to explore similarities and disjunctures between policy directives and policy implementation. The perspectives of key community stakeholders, including children, on early childhood policies and their implementation, are compared with policy intentions stipulated in the state regulatory framework. The study seeks to create opportunities for community-led advocacy for improved policy and practice.

Method: The study is primarily qualitative. In-depth data is being collected from multiple stakeholders, supplemented by documentary and policy review. Key informants include government officials and ECD non-profit organisations with knowledge of policies and systems and experience of implementation. Community-level data collection focuses on understanding the challenges and opportunities that affect early learning and development in a case study community. The sample includes practitioners, government and non-profit service providers, community leaders, parents or caregivers (aged 16 years and older), and children under the age of 6 years. Data will be gathered in individual interviews and focus groups, using participatory activities with parents and children.

Results:

While South African policy promotes children's best interests, inclusion and participatory early childhood education and child protection, there are significant implementation gaps and inconsistencies.

The ECD sector is fragile and underfunded. Mandatory closure of ECD programmes in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic intensified existing challenges and inequalities, increasing young children's isolation, intensifying pressure on families, and compromising their livelihoods. These features are evident in the case community.

Emerging responses show that participants recognize an interconnectedness between safety, inclusion, and participation. Current practices at ECD programmes and at home give insufficient voice to children. Inclusion was viewed as central to the right to early learning. Common barriers to inclusion were financial, neglect, being a foreigner, and having a disability. Participation concerns inclusion and safety; where children feel safe and included, they are more likely to become actively involved.

Implications: The research highlights the importance of understanding early childhood in relation to culture and context, and the need to understand rights realization in an interconnected manner. Making policy implementation contextually-relevant is critical for improved early childhood outcomes.