Elementary Schools on the Countryside From the Eyes of Four- and Five-Year-Old Children

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The research aimed to analyze the elements highlighted in the physical space of the elementary schools in rural areas that children attend to. The methodology used was the hearing of four- and five-year-old boys and girls, mediated through pictures taken by the own children, showing the school spaces that they like and dislike, as well as pictures of free choice. The visualization of each picture encouraged the fluency of children and the specification of the aspects that they wanted to highlight. The results showed that the spaces they like the most are related to nature elements and their recreational spaces. As for spaces that they do not like, they pointed those that pose risks to their health and physical integrity, highlighting the need of renovations. Also, it was clear that schools in rural areas do not contribute to the recognition and discussion of the sociocultural context of rural children since they do not have the resources that allow their contact with elements of the local culture.

Keywords: children, elementary schools, rural areas, physical space

Brazil is a country of continental dimensions, therefore, its educational spaces in the countryside have been structured based on palliative solutions which frequently compromise those physical spaces attended by children, especially by those kids who are initiating their educational journey—the childhood education.

When developing the study along with the contribution of the children from a rural area in the South part of Bahia, we found childhood education schools with physical structures that may represent many schools in the countryside of the Northeast region in the country.

However, we have the obligation to offer those children an education based on humanitarian respect and dignity. Such concept must be clearly focused when the following question is analyzed: How do the rural children see the public educational spaces they go to? We understand that the study of the physical space from the young children point of view may contribute towards the discussion of public policies and pedagogical proposals as well as for the analysis of the subjective aspects regarding those children.

In an interview with Delgado and Müller (2006), Sarmento argues that childhood is not the non-talking age, as all infants have multiple languages with which they express themselves (verbal, gestural, bodily, and plastic); childhood is not the age of non-reason, given that, in addition to the technical-instrumental rationality, other rationalities are constructed; childhood is not the age of non-working, regarding that many children work in multiple daily tasks (the child that helps with the domestic duties, others that help the parents in the fields, and others that contribute to indigenous activities etc.); childhood does not live the age of non-childhood, as the

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childhood is present in the multiple dimensions of living, being, and belonging of a child.

With this same perspective, Corsaro (2011) presents and discusses childhood as a socially constructed period in which children live their lives, as well as a permanent structure, in a category of society that deserves specific studies. For the author, children affect and are affected by other social categories.

One of the possible research fields of infancy is childhood education, which has left the children out when they should be taken as the protagonists of a childhood education project. For being youngsters, they are shut out of decisions that directly involve them, thus many become vulnerable to abusive power of adults. Therefore, children lose space to exercise their individuality and creativity in exchange for what is previously organized for them, also in an alienating condition, which is more accented on children with lower acquisitive possession. These need to learn to deal with the means of production in the place of who produce. The author understands that the family context, educational institutions and the society as one offers the possibility to build proposals regarding an emancipated citizenship based on human dignity and, therefore, suggests the interaction with the children enabling the acknowledge of their wishes and desires (Sodré, 2002).

The childhood education, as the first stage of basic education, needs to be discussed, questioned, and revised. It is the first contact outside the walls for many children who live in the cities and the first experience of expansion of social contacts for some children from the countryside who live far away from major city centers. Caldart (2012) proposes the rural education as a concept under construction, in the modality of childhood education. It appears as a category of analysis where there are rural workers’ children, composing the countryside infancies.

In this study, we discuss the physical space aspects of the scholar institution pointed out by the children; the relation between what the children focus on (based on photos) or report (in their speech) and the elements of their sociocultural context; and the possible relations between the aspects highlighted by the children and the official documents elaborated by the MEC for children’s education.

The study counted on the participation of children in the condition of active and reporting subjects. The focus on what they have to say is justified based on the recognition of the children as social actors, holders of a unique way of being in their generation stage, what makes them privileged witnesses and reporters of those matters that directly affect them. Theoreticians and researchers who study childhood point out the importance of listening to what children have to say mostly in what regards them, among them stood out: Sarmento (2007), Sodré (2002; 2007), Campos (2008), Corsaro (2011), Muller and Carvalho (2009), and others.

For Sarmento (2007), the children’s place in the contemporaneity context is changing, once the ruptures introduced by modernity have deeply altered the social condition of childhood. Children are the main victims of poverty, illness, regional war conflicts, urban insecurity, global finance crashes, and social security systems. He adds that the participation of the child in the collective life, by its own ways will certainly favor a diverse direction of the social changes already in course while transforming difficulties into possibilities of emancipation.

The Study

As a mediator resource for the interlocution process with the children, we used pictures taken by infants from three different countryside schools, and how they justified or explained each photo intermediated by the reproduction in the netbook.

We assigned each school with letters and the three were named as follows: school A, school B, and school
Before starting the study, we tested the procedures with children of the same age group, in a school from the same area but that it was not selected to participate on this study. In this stage, we analyzed the most appropriate procedures from the training with children and camera, and we evaluated the strategy of communication with the children through the notebook and the camera, used to record the dialogue process.

From the analysis of the pilot study, we defined the details of the procedures for the study with the children’s participation. Initially, we explained the research to the child, clarifying that we needed their help to talk about the educational space they attended, in order for this to happen, we would give them a camera so that they could take six pictures. Two of those pictures should be taken of a place they like in the school, another two pictures of places they did not like and the last two of random choice of their own. We gave them the camera and told them how to use it and let them play with it a little while. We also explained that after they took the pictures we would sit down and talk about places pictured and confirm their consent to participate on the study.

Once they consented with the study, we invited one by one to participate in the project. We handed them the camera and showed them how it worked; and we let them take some photos and after a brief period of test, we verified if the child was able to handle the camera. We then asked the infant to take the two first pictures of a preferred place.

After taking the two photos, we took the child to a place that was previously prepared to upload the pictures onto the notebook and we put the camera in the tape mode in order to record the interlocution with the child. We showed them the first picture and asked them questions about it. We took note of the children’s answers on the following questions: Why did you choose this place? What do you like about it? Describe something that happened that made you like it? We repeated the same procedure with the second picture and, at the end of the discussion about the second photo, we added the following question: Is there anything in that picture that reminds you of something from your home?

Analysis of the pilot study showed that the process of dialogue with the six pictures was time consuming and tiring for children. In view of that, we decided to talk about two pictures of the places they did not like on another day and the photos that they chose on the following day.

Some questions were previously elaborated to stimulate the discussion with the children. However, here we only highlight the indications of the photos of the places of the school that the children liked most as well as the free areas and their respective analysis.

The concept of interpretative reproduction created by Corsaro (2011, p. 53), points out the fact that “children transform the adult world information in order to respond to the preoccupations of their own world thus they simultaneously contribute to the reproduction of adult culture”. The proposal of the interlocution process built with children reflects such concept when we understand that through taking pictures the children are able to appropriate of a world planned and built by adults and when focusing on the places of the school they like most or randomly chose, it denotes the fact that they might be attentive to their own interests and in an active way ready to reflections or critics of these places.

**What Do the Children Have to Say**

The first aspect to be highlighted is that recreation and nature appear most frequently in the justification
for the choice of places children like the most. Besides that, on the free choice pictures the most photographed places were the places which contain elements of nature. And in their justifications, it is clear the explicit relation made by the children between the act of playing and nature.

Initially, we point out for discussion the relation between child and nature, mainly because these are children who live in rural areas. In order to assure more clarity to the discussion of such relation, we describe the interlocution process with a 4-year-old girl:

Researcher: Where is this place? Why did you take this picture?
Girl: The woods (it was the first and prompt response to the question).
Researcher: Why do you like this place?
Girl: Because there are trees... because there is a mango tree.
Researcher: Why do you like that tree?
Girl: Because it bears fruits.
Researcher: Have you ever done anything in this place you liked?
Girl: Yes, taking pictures.
Researcher: And before that, have you ever done anything else in this place?
Girl: I see it (the window of the child’s classroom is faced towards that area).
So, the researcher asks the girl if she had played in that place before.
Girl: Yes, We played Chase, Hide and seek, and, had.

In the portrayed area (see Figure 1), outside the school, there is a subterranean water reservoir which is surrounded by plants and it is located under the shadow of a Rose Apple tree (not a mango tree as identified by the child). The shadow of the tree on the wall can be observed in the photo taken.

![Figure 1](image)

*Figure 1. Picture of a 4-year-old girl of the school A in one of the places that she most likes “The Tank Cover” (Source: Study, 2012).*

We point out that this is the largest outside area used by the children during their break. The external area is small (14.38 m²) and the children only used this space and the hallways of the school to play at.

What caught our attention during the interlocution process was the fact that what the child referred to “woods”, and then she explained it was a tree; it is only portrayed by its shadows on the wall. From another point of view, since the window is placed a little bit higher in the classroom than the child herself, the only sight she has is of the tree.

The different children’s answers about what they like in childhood education were ordered by categories. The categories most indicated by the children were: outside in a natural environment as well as toys and games. The study discusses the fact that the interest in open spaces and nature might be associated with the possibility
of a greater social interaction through the games played with other children. It is plausible to discuss childhood education in these spaces and the experiences it provides for the infants, taking the view that in these schools they spend most of their time indoors and distant from nature and from the spontaneous children’s games.

The second picture taken by the child (see Figure 2) was about the places she likes and she portrayed the school corridor (the corridor is in the external area) that connects the other classrooms. When asked about her choice the child explained that there was a vase (with plants) placed at the end of the corridor and also that she could run on it.

As there was no visible vase with plants in the picture, the researcher repeated the question concerning the same picture in order to discard the possibility of an answer being giving randomly. Notwithstanding, the child insisted on saying that she liked that place because of the vase. In a posterior photo, taken by the same child (see Figure 3), we can see a teacher sitting on a chair blocking the vision of the vase or vases. The picture of the vases is one of the child’s two free choice photos. Once more the child shows coherence and consistence in her analysis about what she likes about children’s education spaces by establishing a relation between nature elements and recreation.

The analysis of this 4-year-old girl interlocution process was exemplary in comparison with the others. Children made it clear that they focus their attention on nature elements present in the schools external or open spaces. This will lead us towards the discussion of the identity process with the countryside that the school can
The cities and the large urban centers may attract the children’s attention due to its variety of opportunities or resources and they may compete with those aspects present on the rural schools. What we highlight here is that it should also be the education aim to strengthen the bond between children and their place of origin which is stated in official documents. For instance, the National Curricular Directives for Children Education (Brasil, 2010) (Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para a Educação Infantil) establishes, among other things, that the school must relate the way of life of the children to the formation of their identity.

It is important to recognize that recreation contributes in an effective way to the appropriation of the human culture process and counting on nature’s elements in this process may favor the development of those children in a way that becomes coherent with their reality. To Vigotsky (2007), human-beings show a relation with the environment they are living in which they internalize signs from their surroundings, slowly arranging them as an inner symbolic system. In this process, the structuring and the perception of the acknowledgement of the world are created. In that line of thinking, an analogy can be made between statements of diverse studies such as Del Priore (2008) and Lopes and Vasconcellos (2005), when they affirm that there is a close relation between childhood living and the place where it is lived. Each social group not only elaborates the cultural dimensions making possible the surfacing of the child subjectivity related to the place, but it also designates the existence of places in the physical space that materialize such a condition. It can be inferred that the space it is not neutral, therefore, it can either be appealing, stimulating, interesting, and joyful or limit the learning and the different languages of children.

The study of the physical aspects of the educational context that they describe points towards those questions, however, it is in the justifications that such relations are better exposed.

A 5-year-old boy in his first photo portrays a place which he named “passing place” and justified it by saying that was a magical place for him, a place where he could play, a secret place leading to a cocoa tree at the end of the corridor. The child, once again, associated the picture with two things he likes: playing and nature. In the three dimension perspective of the school A (see Figure 4), we highlighted with a blue line highlights the trajectory followed by the boy from his classroom to the cocoa tree. The arrowed red line indicates the direction he looks at.

![Figure 4. 3D view of school A (Source: Study, 2012).](image-url)
In the free choice photos, the nature element appears again in the picture of a 4-year-old girl, whom portrays the garden (see Figure 5), thus justifying her choice: I like planting; I planted a garden at home. Also two boys portrayed nature in their pictures of free choice. The 5-year-old boy photographed (see Figure 6) an inner wall of the institution that contains a mural that is painted with flowers and gluing a rubber tree. He answered the first question saying he took a picture of flowers and of a bottom of a tree.

![Figure 5](image)

*Figure 5. A picture from a 4-year-old girl in school C in one of her free choice photos (Source: Study, 2012).*

The other boy also photographed the garden and it was also his first picture of free choice; in his first answer he calls it of a place to plant. In his justification of the chosen space, he says: “Because I liked it, the gardening; I planted cabbage”. It is noteworthy that, of the three educational spaces researched, this is the only one that contains a vegetable garden.

![Figure 6](image)

*Figure 6. Photo from a 5-year-old girl school C (Source: Study, 2012).*

Elali (2003) states that the garden can support children in understanding the mechanisms of nature, once it allows the infant to follow the plant from its plantation to its crop. Even though the space holds a garden, it is the only interaction that children may have with nature, in this institution. Therefore, the painting on the wall and the garden are the only elements in this institution that make reference to the socio-cultural universe of its children.
Final Considerations

School A does not have an outdoor area for children to play in and the only open space is dangerous because it is next to the water reservoir that supplies the school. School C also does not have an outdoor area for children to play in and move freely and the only open space available is used to grow greens and vegetables. Although there is an outdoor area in school B it is not adequate for children to play in.

The children from the countryside who took part in the study lived their childhood in open areas in contact with nature and when they go to school they stay confined into small four walled spaces contrary to the country way of life.

Regarding the children’s reflections, both boys and girls kept their preference for taking pictures of the nature and open areas. They will differ in which concerns the criteria used to choose them. Although both have mentioned in their justifications that they took the pictures because they like being in direct contact with nature, they also play in those places and they think they are beautiful. They diverged in what regards the order of preference. The word “play” appeared more times in the boy’s justifications while the girls made more references to the aesthetic of the space.

The ideas presented lead us to the reflection that the physical space is not restricted to something inert, outside environmental experiences. The school perceived by the children is about the set created by the physical space and the relations that are established there.

By placing the cameras on the children’s hands, the objective was to learn from their analysis and critiques. Inviting them to look at the physical space of the school, photograph it and reflect over it may have collaborated to, when taking the free pictures of their choice, they dared to overpass the classroom doors towards the open areas, justifying their choices without fear of saying that what they really wanted/needed was to play and being in contact with nature elements.

We point out that the education offered to countryside children should focus on each specific case of each inland communities way of living and recognize the different ways of life as fundamental to the construction of the identity of the diversity of the children from the countryside whether they are Quilombolas (descendants from escapee slaves), fishing communities, coastal river communities, settlers, or others.

An education that bonds the school to the community reassures the dignity conditions, respect and consideration to the diversity that enriches the Brazilian culture. Ergo, it is necessary to rethink the physical spaces that offer inadequate even inhuman arrangements contributing to the violation of the possibility of a life of dignity for the children and the professionals that work in these types of places.

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