

# **Schoolyards in early childhood schools: between the exposed and the hidden, marks and traces**

Maria Leonor Pio Borges de Toledo<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

This article presents a thesis about schoolyards of public early childhood schools in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Given the challenge of expanding schooling capacity and increasing the quality of service, the spaces have been comparatively analyzed, considering not only what is apparent and exposed regarding their physical characteristics, but also the traces that speak about who circulates within them and how. Our goals were: to know the physical characteristics of the schoolyards and their multiplicity of aspects, articulating them with conceptions of childhood, knowledge and the relationship between human being and nature; to know how the schoolyards are used by children and adults; and to outline aspects of closeness and separation between the state of schoolyards and Brazilian legal documents on education. The thesis' methodological strategy was inspired in the figure of the Benjaminian collector in the epistemological sense, and it proposed to build a collection of photographs of schoolyards of public early childhood schools in municipalities in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro, totaling eight municipalities and nine schools. Taking singularity as a possibility to understand totality, the photographs evidence the situation of early childhood education in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The analyses detached the schools from their contexts, taking them as collection pieces, and outlined aspects of closeness and separation between the schoolyards and legal documents.

## **Keywords**

Early childhood education – Spaces – Schoolyards.

**1-** Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil.  
Contato: leonorptoledo@gmail.com

# ***Pátios de escolas de educação infantil: entre o exposto e o escondido, marcas e vestígios***

Maria Leonor Pio Borges de Toledo<sup>1</sup>

## **Resumo**

*Este artigo apresenta uma tese sobre pátios de escolas públicas de educação infantil no estado do Rio de Janeiro. Diante do desafio de ampliar a cobertura e aumentar a qualidade do atendimento, os espaços foram analisados comparativamente, considerando não apenas o aparente e o exposto de suas características físicas, mas também os vestígios que falam de quem circula e como circula por eles. Foram objetivos: conhecer as características físicas dos pátios e a multiplicidade de aspectos presentes, articulando-os às concepções de infância, conhecimento e relação entre ser humano e natureza; conhecer como os pátios são usados pelas crianças e pelos adultos; e delinear os aspectos de aproximação e distanciamento entre as situações dos pátios e os documentos orientadores brasileiros. A estratégia metodológica da tese, inspirada na figura do colecionador benjaminiano no sentido epistemológico, propôs a composição de uma coleção de fotografias dos pátios de escolas exclusivas de educação infantil da rede pública de municípios da região metropolitana e capital do estado do Rio de Janeiro, totalizando oito municípios e nove escolas. Tomando a singularidade como possibilidade de compreensão da totalidade, as fotos evidenciam a situação da educação infantil no estado do Rio de Janeiro. As análises desvincularam as escolas de seus contextos, tomando-as como peças da coleção, e delineararam aspectos de aproximação e distanciamento entre os pátios e os documentos orientadores.*

## **Palavras-chave**

*Educação infantil – Espaços – Pátios.*

**1-** Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil. Contato: leonorptoledo@gmail.com

School spaces are directly implicated in the conquering of two major challenges facing early childhood education in Brazil today: the expansion of schooling capacity and the increase in quality. Amidst tensions and disputes, Brazilian early childhood education has progressed, in the last few decades, in the pursuit of realizing children's rights. In practice, however, the situation has not changed as desired since the studies published by Rosemberg (1999) and Kramer et al. (2001). Recent studies indicate that an incongruity remains between what the law foresees and what municipalities provide: although it is advancing, the country's early childhood schooling capacity is still quite far from meeting the demand (KRAMER et al., 2011; CAMPOS et al., 2011; CAMPOS, 2011).

In spite of the legal advances in early childhood education, in practice (particularly with childcare centers), many guidelines still have not been implemented. The regional and social differences existing in this country of continental dimensions affect the quality of service: both access to early childhood education and the quality of service are, in nationwide terms, unequally distributed between the different segments of Brazilian population (CAMPOS et al., 2011).

In the last decade in the state of Rio de Janeiro, enrolments in early childhood education increased by 13.8%.<sup>1</sup> However, based on absolute enrolment figures for childcare centers and early childhood schools in the 2001 and 2009 censuses, we find a 75.7% expansion

for childcare centers, and a 0.7% reduction for early childhood schools. The increase in childcare center enrolments is related with the public sector's induction into the responsibility for this service, as well as the circulation of ideas about the importance of education in a child's first few years of life.

With regard to early childhood school, the 0.7% enrolment decrease is owing to the age range reduction in this segment, with the inclusion of children ages six years old and even less into the nine-year-long primary education system. With regard to children ages 4 and 5 years old in the state, the early childhood schooling capacity is 66%, which can mean a considerable number of children out of school or wrongly attending primary schools (NUNES; CORSINO; KRAMER, 2011).

In spite of the significant percentage increase in the last decade, the situation of childcare capacity in municipalities of the state of Rio de Janeiro is still alarming: it reaches little more than 16% of the children ages 0 to 3 years old.

There is a strong relationship between the expansion of early childhood education offer and the quality of school spaces. After all, to increase schooling capacity, physical space is necessary. Moreover, in the case of early childhood education, the space must be adequate to young children's needs.

As pointed by Lima (1995), the strategy of lowering service quality is still being used. In the state of Rio de Janeiro, the school spaces' situation of inadequacy and poor conditions is severe. Municipal systems have expanded in different ways, with more effective initiatives (such as the creation of new childhood education spaces, the acquisition of equipment and materials, the municipalization of state and community institutions) or precarious, emergency ones. Among the latter are: decrease in the offer of full-time service and the adoption of part-time service also for young children; no service for children under two years old; enrolment priority for children

**1-** The research group *Infância, Formação e Cultura* [Childhood, Education and Culture] (INFOC), coordinated by professors Sonia Kramer (PUC-Rio), Maria Fernanda Rezende Nunes (UNIRIO and PUC-Rio) and Patrícia Corsino (UFRJ), conducted, from 2009 to 2011, the study titled *Formação de profissionais da educação infantil no estado do Rio de Janeiro: um balanço 10 anos depois* [Early Childhood Education Professional Training in the State of Rio de Janeiro: An Evaluation 10 Years After], which investigated the advances in, and challenges to the realization of children's right to quality education. The study evaluated the situation of early childhood education in the state, fifteen years after the *Educational Guidelines and Framework Law* (LDB) and ten years after a study conducted by the same group in 1999. The methodological strategies were the administration of questionnaires (returned by 59 municipalities) and 23 interviews with early childhood education coordination teams at municipal education departments (NUNES; CORSINO; KRAMER, 2011).

of working mothers and children ages 4 and 5 years old or older children in general; priority for the municipality's inhabitants and people living near the institution; and the hiring of assistants/agents/monitors to work as teachers, without the minimum training required by law, to lower costs. Municipalities have been renting houses, rooms and commercial buildings, as well as using classrooms in primary schools, without the necessary adaptations to early childhood education. In these cases, early childhood classes are often allocated in poor quality, separate spaces.

School spaces' inadequacy is expressed in the lack of outdoor areas and didactical-pedagogical material, as well as the precarious adaptation of spaces to young children's specificities. This precariousness interferes with teachers' work and negatively impacts the quality of service to children. Reality shows the contradiction and tension between spaces' precariousness and poor quality, evidencing the non-linear process of realization of legally conquered rights.

Among the relevant documents for early childhood education, we highlight the following: the *National Curricular Guidelines for Early Childhood Education* (BRASIL, 2009b), the *National Quality Parameters for Early Childhood Education* (BRASIL, 2006b), the *Criteria for Child Care in Day Care Centers that Respect Children's Fundamental Rights* (CAMPOS; ROSEMBERG, 2009), and the *Basic Parameters of Infrastructure for Early Childhood Education Institutions* (BRASIL, 2006a). These documents contain references both to the physical characteristics that early childhood school spaces should have and children's rights related to these characteristics and space use. However, realizing these rights is a direct function of the quality of these spaces.

Although the legal framework ensures children's' rights, and the relevant documents stress the specificity of early childhood education, in practice, the changes achieved by advances in education policies are still far from becoming real in school spaces.

## **School spaces and their implications for children's education**

The spatial dimension is fundamental in education, as pedagogy is carried out in space. More specifically, in a space which is imagined and designed and, as a basis, allows constructions by those who circulate therein: thus, space becomes a place (FRAGO; ESCOLANO, 2001, p. 61).

The school is the institutional space attended by children for hours every day, for years on end. This study views children as historical, social and cultural subjects who constitute themselves in their interaction with the environment of which they are part. Human beings are beings of nature and culture: one is not born human; one becomes human in the relationship with others and the environment one lives in. Since birth, the child is progressively introduced in the culture world by those who take care of it and with whom it lives (VIGOTSKI, 2003). If the various spaces can foment different relationships of children with themselves, with other children, with adults, and with space itself, then they can influence the formation of children's subjectivity. Attending school allows them to experience a spatial (in material and symbolical terms), social and cultural context different from their primary environment, i.e., the family. The school must widen children's range of experiences, thus providing them with support for their creative activity. Imagination depends on the human being's richness and diversity of prior experiences, as experience is the basis for building fantasy. Therefore, the richer the human experience, the greater the material available for imagination. In other words, the more the child experiences, the more it will be able to imagine (VIGOTSKI, 2009).

School spaces can and should offer children what Oswald (2011) calls an *education through the flesh*, which is what one learns by doing, feeling, handling, seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting. It is what one learns



from the whole context in which one lives. The author resorts to Pasolini:

The education a child receives from objects, things, the physical reality – in other words, from the material phenomena of its social condition – corporally makes the child what it is and will be throughout life. What is educated is its flesh, as a form of its spirit. (PASOLINI, 1990, p. 127).

As she recalls that the word *aesthetics* derives from *aesthesia* – sensation, sensibility – the author advocates an education based on the esthetic experience, i.e., the experience that moves, sensibilizes, mobilizes affection: “to esthetically experience something supposes to impregnate oneself with the physical and social world through the senses” (OSWALD, 2011, p. 25).

The school is an esthetic educative space, a privileged place of investigation of processes of autonomy and dependence produced *in* space and *with* the physical space, which means that the implicit or explicit capacities one can find in children are, sometimes, in a direct or indirect reciprocal relationship with the possibilities of the physical space where they develop. The esthetic dimension is an educative principle: the experiences that children go through in school spaces must be esthetic and of pleasure. The school becomes a place inhabited by children, where they feel welcomed and where they feel they belong, as the set of physical, social, and cultural elements therein rouse both personal and collective information, communication and experiences. The school architecture is, therefore, part of both the pedagogical project and the project of society (HOYUELOS, 2005).

Impregnated with the discourse and materiality that reflect conceptions and policies, school spaces affect pedagogical practices. They enable some of these, and impede others, but they always generate implications for children’s relationship with the space, with themselves, with other children, and with adults. It is not just the size or the objective characteristics

which define space, but also the way it is experienced, how it turns into an environment of interactions and life (LIMA, 1989).

In the Brazilian scene, debates after the enactment of the *Education Guidelines and Framework Law* (BRASIL, 1996) brought up the question of physical space as one of the fundamental elements for a pedagogy of early childhood education:

A pedagogy of early childhood education which ensures the right to childhood and the right to better life conditions for all children (poor and rich, white, black and indigenous, boys and girls, foreigners and Brazilian, with special needs, etc.) must necessarily start from our cultural diversity and, therefore, the organization of space must cater for the range of interests of society, families and, mainly, of children, attending to the specificities of each demand, allowing cultural identity and a sense of belonging. (FARIA, 2007, p. 69)

Children, cared for as a product of culture and as culture producers, establish dialogic relationships with the context of which they are part. They creatively appropriate the culture of the world they live in and contribute to its production and transformation (CORSARO, 2011). The school space where these dialogic relationships unfold – as a space of experimentation and discoveries – is a co-operator in the knowledge building process (SILVA, 2006).

This study focuses its glance on schoolyards – spaces with specificities. The fact that they are open, outdoor areas with an organization and elements which differ from those of classrooms has implications in how children and adults interact with them and in them, both individually and collectively: “We must be convinced that our life, our system, our humanity, our culture, our feelings are always connected with nature, with the environment and the universe” (HOYUELOS, 2005, p. 171). Considering that children stay

for at least four hours a day in schools, and that they attend schools for many years, the study of schoolyards is important in that being in the yard or not, playing there or not, learning there or not, makes a difference on how children constitute their subjectivity.

### **Multiple dialogues with Benjamin**

Benjamin (1994, 1995, and 2006) is the main theoretical-methodological source in this study. Experience, narrative, collection, singularity and totality, human being-nature relationship, allegory, the exposed, the hidden, and traces: his work contributes to a glance of the field from multiple perspectives and, in this dialogue, the study relies on the views of other authors about the work of this philosopher (KONDER, 1988; KRAMER, 2003; KRAMER, 2009; KRAMER et al., 1999; BOLLE, 1994, 2009; MATOS, 2009).

To Benjamin, the possibility to exchange experiences is linked to a pre-capitalist way of life in which artisanal handicraft allowed an environment where the experience could happen and, more than this, the dimensions of individual and collective past could unite (LOWY, 1990). Casting a critical eye on the growth of capitalism and barbarism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the author articulates the shocks of modernity to a decline in the capacity to exchange experiences. The impoverishment of the experience brings about the extinction of the art of narrating. The act of narrating is the act of sharing knowledge with the listener, a knowledge impregnated with the traces of the one who narrates, like “the handprints of the potter cling to a clay vessel” (BENJAMIN, 1994, p. 205).

The extinction of narrative is a product and a producer of the condition of human degradation. As it disappears, so does the bridge between past and present, the individual and tradition, individual past and collective past. Guattari (2007), who wrote about the need for a change in the relationship between human beings and nature, built on Benjamin. When, regarding

the contemporary situation, Guattari (2007, p.27) says that, in capitalism, “not only the species disappear, but also the words, the sentences, the gestures of human solidarity”, one can say that what Benjamin feared actually happened.

Another contribution of Benjamin (1995) is the vision of the whole in the fragment, and of singularity as a possibility to understand totality. This is related to allegorical writing. The allegory, unlike the symbol, “starts from the universal and uses the particular to exemplify it, as an illustration of the universal” (KONDER, 1988, p. 28). Benjamin establishes a relationship between allegories and ruins, the former pertaining to the realm of thoughts and the latter to the realm of things. Thus, allegories – ruins of thoughts – allow the construction of knowledge as they bring tension to signs, which refer to the universal while starting from something specific and apparently insignificant.

In the fragment “Cafè Crème”, about the differences between having breakfast in Paris in a hotel room or in a bistro, Benjamin advocates the latter option, arguing that, in the bistro, “among all the mirrors, the *petit déjeuner* [breakfast] is itself a concave mirror in which a minute image of this city is reflected” (BENJAMIN, 1995, p. 214).

Allegorical writing makes explicit the author’s view that the (apparently) insignificant, the singularity, allows the knowledge of the whole, the universal. Benjamin talks about the act of having breakfast in a Parisian bistro as a mirror of the city and the way of life of its inhabitants. Similarly, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the author discovers the Parisian arcades as the core of the modern metropolis, “miniatures of what the bourgeois city would like to be” (KONDER, 1988, p. 80), where “ways of behavior marked by a profit- and consumption-oriented mentality”, which are so explicit today, became evident (BOLLE, 2009, p. 25).

Images pervade the work of Benjamin, but they are stronger in his unfinished *Arcades Project*. According with Bolle (1994, p. 271), to Benjamin, the contemporary city is modernity’s

place of sensory and intellectual experience. In the words of Benjamin himself (1995, p. 147-148):

As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything, they preserve the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellation. The stamp of definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended for ever, no figure asserts it 'thus and not otherwise'. This is how architecture, the most binding part of the communal rhythm, comes into being here.

Benjamin writes about spaces considering both their physical characteristics and intangible aspects related to the esthetic impression that these spaces provoked in him. People's movements, their habits, the incidence of light, the smells and sounds speak about the soul of a certain space or place: they are as important for understanding it as its physical conditions. Precisely because he considers the dimensions above, Benjamin knows that spaces are alive and change according with people's actions.

This study sought to look at the field through Benjaminian lenses, producing meanings about the schoolyards of early childhood schools. It considered both the physical characteristics of the spaces – its apparent, exposed aspects – and the marks and traces which show to the researcher who circulates in these spaces and how. After all, "there is no spot where the owner has not left its mark" (BENJAMIN, 1995, p. 266). In his work, Benjamin was not satisfied to just look at what was exposed, what was easily perceived. On the contrary, he was attentive to the reverse and the folds (of places, of history), to traces (left like marks of those who were there), and to hideouts (possibilities perceived by children as they assign new meanings to spaces and objects).

Based on this author, we can say that the schoolyards of early childhood schools show not only tangible aspects, but also intangible ones, present in marks and traces of

children and adults who circulate therein and, therefore, of their practices and conceptions. In this perspective, the use of photographs is a pertinent methodological resource which allows the enrichment of the analyses.

Another contribution comes from him in the figure of the collector. In the fragment *Enlargements*, in *One-Way Street*, he writes about the untidy child: "Each stone he finds, each flower he picks, and each butterfly he catches is already the start of a collection, and every single thing he owns makes up one great collection" (BENJAMIN, 1994, p. 39). In *Thought-Images*, Benjamin, a collector himself, points out that the existence of both collector and collection is "a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order" (BENJAMIN, 1995, p. 228). These two poles become in tension in the collector's movement of organizing and reorganizing the collection, now based what unites the pieces, now based on what differentiate them. To the author, the authentic collector has an intimate relationship of possession with the pieces of his collection, not because they are alive within him, but rather because "it is he who lives in them" (BENJAMIN, 1995, p. 235).

Inspired in the figure of the Benjaminian collector in the epistemological sense, the study proposed to build a collection of photographs of schoolyards of public early childhood schools in municipalities in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro. The study assumed a comparative character regarding the characteristics that approximate and separate the schoolyards of early childhood schools, with the following goals: to know the physical characteristics of the schoolyards and their multiplicity of aspects (dimensions, elements and materials), articulating them with conceptions of childhood, knowledge and the relationship between human being and nature; to know how the schoolyards are used by children and adults; and to outline aspects of closeness and separation between the state of schoolyards and what is set forth in the *National Curricular Guidelines for Early*

*Childhood Education* (BRASIL, 2009b), the *Basic Parameters of Infrastructure for Early Childhood Education Institutions* (BRASIL, 2006a), and the Criteria for Child Care in *Day Care Centers that Respect Children's Fundamental Rights* (CAMPOS; ROSEMBERG, 2009). Thus, we intended to outline the distance between the real and the ideal. We tried to assess/know the conditions that the studied spaces offer for children to establish pedagogical and political relations between themselves and with adults, articulating data from the empirical field with legal documents concerning early childhood education in the country.

The photographs were taken as a writing using light and as a basis for building knowledge about the schoolyards. As we formed a collection, we were able to organize and reorganize them according with aspects that unite and separate them, these aspects being the meanings built in a dialogical relation between the researcher/collector and the field of research/photographs/collection pieces.

With regard to the discussion about images in our contemporariness, if, on the one hand, there is a tendency towards human being's impoverishment in its relationship with images, on the other, there is also the possibility to build knowledge from them. According with Jobin e Souza (2000, p. 18), "it is in the use of image itself that resides the possibility of a critical reflection about the multiple paths – whether regressive or emancipatory – contained in it."

The characteristics of our contemporary world require a change in narrative. Narrative can no longer be restricted to one thread, it can no longer be linear: the possibility to build a new look on contemporariness resides precisely in the dialogue between the linearity of the text and the transversality of the image. In the contemporary world, technique and technology pervade and redefine our experience of space and time, requiring the formulation of new conceptual categories that can contribute to understand the subject's experience. It is necessary "to consider the simultaneousness

and the extension of events [...] to give sense to what we see" (JOBIM E SOUZA, 2000, p. 18).

Besides Benjamin, we build on Ítalo Calvino (2011) and João Cabral de Melo Neto (2008), as they wrote about real or imaginary spaces with the same meaning-creating, interpretive look, as well as Jobin e Souza (2000). We chose these authors because they indicate a methodology: by reading their works, one can learn a way of looking at, and writing about cities.

In writing about Paris and characterizing it as the capital of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Benjamin (1994, 2006) elaborates a critique of modernity. He was able to read the culture of modernity from: the city's characters, such as the bohemian, the prostitute and the *flanêur*; its fashion; technical novelties, such as cast-iron structures and photography; and, particularly, the architecture, such as arcades and commercial galleries, where he saw the world as the bourgeoisie wished it to be.

In *The Invisible Cities*, Calvino (2011) presents the narratives of Marco Polo about the fictitious cities he visited. Each city is delicately described in short texts which, together, form a collection of memoirs of the narrator – who knew how to exalt both tangible and intangible characteristics, i.e., what was apparent, exposed, and also the traces of people, time and history. According with the author, a city is like a sponge which swells as it becomes soaked in recollections: it does not tell its past, but contains it like lines on a palm, written on street corners, bars in windows, handrails, etc. (CALVINO, 2011).

João Cabral de Melo Neto (2008) wrote about the cities where he lived, their cartography, climate, inhabitants, and also about the marks those places leave on people, as described in his book *Sevilha andando*. The works of these three authors allow the reader to know totality by looking at singularity: the city can be known for its genuine characteristics, the aspects that make it unique. Their narratives are literary photographs of the places and characters they describe,

readings/glances impregnated with significance. As to the photographic images used in this study as a methodological research, they collaborate to enrich the researcher's look and, consequently, the readings/narratives about the studied field. According with Jobim e Souza (2000, p. 19):

Well, to cease submitting to or being dominated by the image is to know how to create new meanings, to invent compositions that change our perception of the world in new directions. The image that is constructed, forged, worked on, enriched with the multiplicity of experiences and situations captured from everyday life in a single frame, recreates reality, transforms the real, suggests new possibilities for exercising a variety of cultural experiences.

Therefore, a researcher's relationship with photography should be a dialogical one which allows the perception of the world to expand, and new meanings for reality can thus be constructed.

### **Forming the collection of schools**

In the state of Rio de Janeiro, the capital city and its metropolitan area play a relevant role, concentrating 69% of the population, as well as 65% of day care center enrolments and 63.9% of pre-school enrolments (NUNES; CORSINO; KRAMER, 2011, p. 22). Given this situation, the study chose a methodological approach: to work with photographs of schoolyards of public early childhood schools which provide day care and/or pre-schooling in the state's capital, i.e., the city of Rio de Janeiro, and municipalities in its metropolitan area,<sup>2</sup> totaling eight municipalities and nine schools.

**2-** The municipalities in the metropolitan area of the state of Rio de Janeiro are: Rio de Janeiro (capital), Belford Roxo, Duque de Caxias, Guapimirim, Itaboraí, Itaguaí, Japeri, Magé, Maricá, Mesquita, Nilópolis, Niterói, Nova Iguaçu, Paracambi, Queimados, São Gonçalo, São João de Meriti, Seropédica and Tanguá.

The municipalities chosen were Rio de Janeiro, São João de Meriti, Itaguaí, Guapimirim, Duque de Caxias, São Gonçalo, Belford Roxo and Niterói. One municipality participated in the study with two institutions that characterize two types of school in its municipal system, i.e., an old one and a recent one.

Having chosen the municipalities and the schools, one question emerged: the picture of the school is the picture of the municipality, it identifies and represents it: it is the singularity that allows seeing the totality. Going a step further: the national education policy is realized through municipal policies, which are many, diverse, and change from one administration to the next. Therefore, it is necessary to consider that there are differences within the municipal systems themselves, that the schools that form them are not equal. There are differences as to how old they are, the quality of their spaces, their architectural design, among others. Because the research field was circumscribed to the capital and the Baixada Fluminense area, a geographically concentrated territory with historical, social and political proximities, we can say that a school chosen in one municipality could be part of the municipal systems of the others. In this respect, the study understood the municipalities as a collection. At the same time, it understood each of them as a context, with its history and profile. Therefore, the municipalities the schools belong to were not identified.

With regard to the schoolyard photographs themselves, even after the selection, there were approximately 150. Given such an avalanche, an effort was necessary to cause a few images to stand out (JOBIM E SOUZA, 2000). In a flâneur-like process, the choices were guided by the esthetical impression caused on the author (EVANGELISTA, 2003; OSWALD, 2011; PEREIRA, 2011) and by indications that it would be possible to dialogue with, and build meanings about these images (JOBIM E SOUZA, 2000). Finally, 113 photographs of nine schools were selected. Below are a few photographs of the schools:



**Figure 1-** School 1, front view.



**Figure 2-** School 1, side view.



**Figure 3-** School 1, indoor yard.



**Figure 4-** School 2, side yard.



**Figure 5-** School 2, yard view.



**Figure 6-** School 3, front view.



**Figure 7-** School 3, yard view.



**Figure 8-** School 3, yard view.



**Figure 9-** School 4, front view.



**Figure 10-** School 4, yard elements.



**Figure 11-** School 4, yard elements.



**Figure 12-** School 5, yard view.



**Figure 13-** School 5, toy in the yard.



**Figure 14-** School 6, yard view.



**Figure 15-** School 6, side yard view.



**Figure 16-** School 6, playhouse..





**Figure 17-** School 7, front yard.



**Figure 18-** School 7, courtyard.



**Figure 19-** School 7, courtyard.



**Figure 20-** School 8, front yard.



**Figure 21-** School 8, front yard.



**Figure 22-** School 8, backyard.



**Figure 23-** School 9, yard.



**Figure 24-** School 9, toys.



**Figure 25-** School 9, yard, playhouse and tunnel.



The analyses were understood as a glance, a reading of reality, and, as such, they are marked by provisionality. Provisional was also the exercise of organizing, disorganizing and reorganizing the collection of photographs. These were attempts to create some order in disorder, like a child who sets a criterion to organize the pieces of its collection and, at the end of the arrangement, suddenly undoes it and sets another arrangement criterion for the pieces, and so on. This perspective allowed looking at the field in a directed way, while also allowing ourselves to be surprised by it.

The study followed the lines both in the spaces and in legal documents on early childhood education, taking them as traces. It searched the schools for marks and frameworks. The marks of those who make childhood education on a daily basis, i.e., children and adults, teachers and managers, who give life to those spaces. And the framework, i.e., the legal documents and other documents that guide childhood education; thus we conducted a critical reading of the execution of early childhood education policies carried out by the municipalities.

We chose three legal documents: the *Criteria for Child Care in Day Care Centers that Respect Children's Fundamental Rights* (CAMPOS; ROSEMBERG, 2009), the *Basic Parameters of Infrastructure for early childhood Education Institutions* (BRASIL, 2006a), and

the *National Curricular Guidelines for Early Childhood Education* (BRASIL, 2009b).

The analyses were organized in eight categories: reflections about the *Basic Parameters of Infrastructure for Early Childhood Education Institutions*; technical aspects – conditions and characteristics of the schools' premises and perimeters; the existing schools – remodeling, adaptation and maintenance; schoolyard conceptions; schoolyard characteristics – dimensions, elements and organization; sustainability conception; child-nature relationship; and presence in absence – marks and traces of children and adults.

### **Still a long way to go**

The study was only possible because the nine schools showed the totality that reveals itself in singularity, as Benjamin (1995) says. More than fragments, together, they form a panorama of the situation of early childhood education in the metropolitan area of the state of Rio de Janeiro.

The schools evidence that the conditions of early childhood education institutions are not good. Precariousness can be seen already in the land plots or the premises chosen, with characteristics almost always inadequate to the functioning of early childhood schools.

According with the *Parameters of Infrastructure*, choosing a plot to build a school must be conditioned to verifying the “basic infrastructure conditions, such as paved streets, sewer lines, electricity, water supply and waste collection”, in addition to telephone network and public transportation (BRASIL, 2006a, p. 23). Floodable and former landfill areas are to be avoided. However, authorities seem take no notice of these guidelines. School 7, which opened in 2003 as part of the Nova Baixada program, was built in a flooded area, and, because of this instability, cracks opened on the floor, which also sunk over the years. By the end of 2012, the cracks grew to the point of becoming a threat to children and teachers, and the school was closed not to resume activities

until June, 2013, after maintenance works, which, according with the school's coordinator, were not adequately performed.

**Figure 26-** Repair in cracks on the floor of School 7.



With regard to the executive power, the practice of taking isolated, disarticulated actions persists even when they are the responsibility of the same government level. Although the municipality repaired the cracks and the sinking floor, it took no measures to install pipes in the open sewage ditch running close to the school's wall. As absurd as choosing a plot next to an open sewage to build an early childhood school is to let this situation remain for ten years with no prediction of change. Moreover, this school opened with no connection to water supply or a sewer line, and, for ten years, the water it used was supplied by tank trucks, which filled a cistern that was not correctly installed and is until today above the ground, in the tiny schoolyard behind the premises. Today, School 7 is connected to water supply, but in an irregular situation: the community, tired of

waiting for governmental action, made water supply connections to people's homes without official authorization, and, in the process, the same was done for the school.

This set of problems shows that the education policy is recklessly rushed with no respect for minimum conditions and even less for the children. This conduction is contrary to a childcare policy committed to children's well-being and development, one that would take these aspects as guiding principles in childcare centers' construction and remodeling plans (CAMPOS; ROSEMBERG, 2009).

The older schools seem to offer schoolyards that are better and more interesting to children than the schools recently built/installed, which is curious, as those schools were built in the early 20th century, a period when the conception of early childhood education was quite different from what is advocated today. In a Brazil still without an instituted educational unity, there were no documents or guidelines that expressed a pedagogical concern about the quality of spaces for young children. Even so, the two oldest schools in the collection have characteristics which, by today's standards, are considered fundamental to early childhood education, such as: wide yards; the presence of elements such as fixed toys and benches made of various natural and non-natural materials; and the yards' disposition invites children's encounter and interaction both with the space and between themselves.

**Figure 27-** Front view of School 2 - opened in 1925



**Figure 28-** Front view of School 3 - opened in 1909 - (arrow indicates gate).





More recent schools seem to point to the fact that they are recurrently installed without prioritizing children, what is best to them and what is theirs by right – whether by technical incompetence, subordination to electoral or dubious interests.

The schoolyards vary in terms of size, elements and disposition, which is consistent with the multiplicity of contexts but does not mean good conditions are offered to children. Besides size, the existing elements and their

disposition can invite children to play and stay there or not, depending on the presence or absence of toys, pleasant spots, benches and shade.

Plastic toys are present in three schools. In other four, the toys, particularly fixed ones, are made of iron and wood. It is worth noting the lack of loose toys, found in only one school – it is worth highlighting that they are made of plastic. In another one, the concrete-made elements cannot be called toys.

**Figure 29-** Concrete-made fixed elements in School 4.



**Figure 30-** Plastic toys in School 1's indoor yard.



**Figure 31-** Plastic toys in School 2, with wooden toys in the background.



**Figure 32-** Iron toys in School 9.



**Figure 33-** Wooden toys in School 6.



**Figure 34-** Wooden and iron toys in School 8.



The absence of playhouses is remarkable: of the nine schools, only four have playhouses, one of them being not quite a playhouse, although it evokes one because of the shape of its roof. One of the

schools have three playhouses, two made of plastic and a brick-and-mortar one. The last, however, was being used as a deposit when the photographs were taken, which did not allow their use by children.

**Figure 35-** Playhouse, School 5.



**Figure 36-** Playhouse, School 6



**Figure 37-** Playhouse, School 4.



**Figure 38-** Playhouse, School 2.



**Figure 39-** Inside the playhouse, School 2.



**Figure 40-** Playhouse, School 2.



Although the presence of a playhouse is not a condition for children to play make believe, its materiality invites playing. Given the difficulty to have a playhouse within a room, the schoolyard is the privileged place. The fact that only four schools have playhouses signals that, for all the talk about how playing is important to children, it is not valued even in spaces dedicated to playing, i.e., the yards. An abyss seems to remain between theory and practice, discourse and early childhood education's everyday reality. None of the schools has an amphitheater or a similar space dedicated to drama activities

This evidences that playing, particularly make believe, is not a priority in early childhood education.

In common, the yards show few marks and traces of children, considering marks as the signs intentionally left, and traces as non-intentional marks – presence in absence. Of the nine schools, only four show marks of children, with three of them displaying them on bulletin boards. In School 6, children's handprints in paint can be seen on the flowerbed walls next to the playhouse and, in Schools 2, 3 and 4, bulletin boards display children's works, evidencing their authorship and singularity.

**Figure 41-** Flowerbeds and playhouse in School 6.



**Figure 42-** Bulletin board at School 2's lunchroom.



In four schools, traces left by children were found, indicating their activities and games. In School 2's yard, one can see a small rocking chair upside down, two small chairs lying on their sides and a hobbyhorse on the ground. Both the rocking chair – made of wood – and the

hobbyhorse are indoor toys, and their presence in the yard indicates they were forgotten there. The rocking chair upside down and the chairs lying on their sides evoke children's games, which subvert the use of object as they try new perspectives, as Benjamin (1995) noted.

**Figure 43-** Hobbyhorse forgotten on the ground in School 2.



**Figure 44-** Playhouse in School 2.





Still in School 2, dry, chopped leaves on the floor of one of the playhouses stand out to the eye and seem to indicate play food games.

In Schools 3 and 9, the traces left by children are related with use and time of use. In these cases, toys' paint gradually wore off with the repeated use and time of use, whether on the slide slope, the seesaw and carrousel seats, or the swing, seesaw and slide handles.

**Figure 45-** Slide with a worn off paint in School 3



There is yet another type of trace left by children, such as bath towels and child clothes hanging in two schools. Although these are objects used by children, they were left there by adults.

**Figure 46-** Towels hanging in School 6.



**Figure 47-** Line for towels in School 9.



The photographs evidence that there are more traces than marks of children in the yards, i.e., what can be seen of children's presence is more accidental than intentional. This means that the yards are spaces they appropriate and transform little. Although yards are places where children build knowledge, the few traces found in the photographs do not indicate activities conducted or proposed by teachers. With regard to adults, the marks found are restricted to decorative elements on doors and bulletin boards, and their traces, to bicycles.

**Figure 48-** Bicycles on the side of School 1.



**Figure 49-** Ornaments on classroom doors in School 1.





Yards are places where nature appears in the school: trees, bushes, grass and earth. Although the presence of nature is fundamental, it does not, by itself, ensure children the experience of fruition, the exercise of sensibility, and the sharpening of the eye to the beauty of the world. A child constitutes itself subjectively in its interaction with the context of which it is part, in its physical, social and cultural dimensions (VIGOTSKI, 2003). Children's relationship of belonging and proximity to nature is built by the mediation of another, in the case of the school, the teachers. Also noteworthy is the absence of water available to children, whether in showers, taps or hoses. Why, in a state with high temperatures such as Rio de Janeiro, children cannot play with water?

The most characteristic elements in the yards are fixed toys, although they are not present in all of them. The photographs showed that there are generations of toys succeeding each other: toys made of iron, wood and plastic. With regard to plastic toys, it is worth problematizing their recommendation in the

Ministry of Education' (MEC) guidebooks for acquisition of furniture for the Proinfância program,<sup>3</sup> as well as the recommendation of synthetic grass in playgrounds. MEC's approval is powerful, and the requirement for these to be the toys in Proinfância's schools, even more so. The methodology adopted by the National Fund for the Development of Education (FNDE) centralized the purchase of all the material, furniture and equipment used in Proinfância's schools, and thus constituted a cartel of suppliers, which are the main beneficiary. It is worth noting that the study did not investigate any school built with funds from Proinfância, since by the time the empirical field was defined, the program was still being implemented. However, we suggest studies having Proinfância as their object.

The differences between schoolyards also derive from the fact that the schools were implemented in different times of history. The context includes the spatial and temporal dimensions. The oldest school opened in 1909, and the newest in 2012.

**Figure 50-** Front view of school 3.



With this reservation, we can say that the schoolyards show a great distance in relation to the legal documents mentioned, i.e., the schools' reality is far from what is considered ideal today. The documents do not, by themselves, generate changes. Because something is suggested in the *Basic Parameters of Infrastructure* (BRASIL,

**Figure 51-** Front view of school 4.



**3-** Proinfância (Program for the Restructuration and Acquisition of Equipment for the Public Early Childhood School System) began in 2007 as part of the actions of the Plan for the Development of Education (PDE) of the Ministry of Education. It was created by the federal government, based on the idea that building Child Care and Pre-school facilities and acquiring equipment for the school system on this education level are indispensable to improve the quality of education.

2006a) or stated in the *National Curricular Guidelines* (BRASIL, 2009b) and in the Criteria for Child Care (CAMPOS; ROSEMBERG, 2009), this does not ensure its existence. These documents are not policies: they express policies, they can help materialize them, but they do not change practice. *The Basic Parameters of Infrastructure* (BRASIL, 2006a) seem to have exercised little influence on schoolyards since they were issued.

The schoolyards evidence municipalities' difficulties to realize education policies with quality. This situation is historically related to the process initiated with the *Constitution* (BRASIL, 1988), in which municipalities assumed the responsibility for basic education, organizing their own education systems. The difficulty to meet the demand for places in early childhood education worsened as this education became mandatory from the age of four (BRASIL, 2009a). The decentralization process has, since the beginning, been subject to the interference of factors such as the budgetary and management capacity of government units and local civic culture (ARRETCHE, 1999).

Different schoolyards, different childhoods, different relationships between children and their contexts. The situation stirs both government and society towards ensuring children's rights to a quality early childhood education in which the *Curricular Guidelines* (BRASIL, 2009b) are actually experienced. An education where children can learn from the experience that moves, sensitizes and sharpens their senses. That they may learn with things and spaces that can educate them bodily, affectively and intellectually.

The study focused on early childhood schoolyards, spaces dedicated to children, but not always planned or built for them. The fact is that children are in schools and spend a good part of their days there. As the users of these spaces, they can speak about the yards and contribute to their improvement. Inasmuch as they can produce discourses, children can help us make better spaces for them. Based on their interests and desires, every schoolyard can be a place that both welcomes and instigates them in their knowledge building process.

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**Maria Leonor Pio Borges de Toledo** is a specialist in early childhood education and holds a Ph.D. in education from the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RJ). She teaches for the education department and the early childhood education graduate program *Perspectivas de trabalho em creches e pré-escolas*, at PUC-RJ; she is also a member of the research group *Infância, Formação e Cultura (INFOC)*.