

School transition in rural northeast Brazil

The ‘Parques Infantis’ programme

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For children in the rural areas² of northeast Brazil, the transition to school is context-specific. Unlike their counterparts in towns and cities, rural children tend to be well-acquainted with their teachers, school director and the school premises. This familiarity is largely due to the fact that the majority of teachers live in the local community. Teachers tend to be their pupils’ neighbours and are well-known to the children’s parents.

School dynamics – timetables, regulations, learning materials, snacks and so on – are also familiar to rural children. Their siblings and friends attend the same school and share daily experiences with them.

According to 2005 figures provided by Ceará State’s Secretary of Education, 98 percent of children of compulsory school age (7 years) attend school – whether in rural or urban areas of the State, whether in a morning or afternoon four-hour session. IFAN’s experience in northeast Brazil shows that several systemic factors specific to rural areas make school access, the transition to school life and continued class attendance easier for children. Amongst the most significant are the existence of a municipal public schools network (for primary education) within major rural communities; daily school transport that is free and available to children in the most remote rural locations; a daily snack programme for all pupils; and a federal programme which provides financial support to the poorest families as long as they keep their children in school.

However, curriculum is certainly another major factor to be considered in any analysis of the rural school transition. The Federal Law on Base Guidelines for Education (LDB 9394/96) establishes

a common new curriculum for all schools in Brazil. This same law nevertheless gives autonomy to the schools and school boards in the development and procurement of specific pedagogical contents reflecting local social and cultural realities. This includes purchases of school books with such content and the organisation of pedagogical and innovative local programmes.

Theoretically, the LDB 9394/96 is a flexible and modern pedagogical framework. In practice, however, children from rural areas face a series of challenges related to the current structure and institutional culture of the school. Specifically, there is an implicit assumption by rural school teachers that pupils and their families must adapt to school demands and needs. This assumption is reflected in a set of daily realities during pupil transition. First, children’s school readiness is directly linked to their chronological age rather than to their learning capacity or cultural background. Second, curricular activities are monotonous, with complex contents, and do not take into account children’s limited ability to focus and reflect on abstract concepts. Third, school learning assessments focus strictly on cognitive abilities, ignoring the value of children’s emotional, social and cultural abilities. And finally, school results are associated with a hierarchy of knowledge defined by the school and not by the interests and choices of the child. Teacher–pupil interaction is based on rigid discipline; it does not allow the child to negotiate or participate actively in the selection of new areas of learning.

School success: Whose responsibility?

Teachers generally admit that most parents in rural areas have a low level of education and face daily

family hardships. Underemployment, poverty, alcoholism among men, and doubly long working hours for women – all of these make it difficult for families to follow their children’s school careers. Nevertheless, teachers see family members as responsible for children’s success or failure at school.

Family acceptance of this role is explained by the fact that poor rural families tend to see the school as a symbol of absolute authority. This perception generates an asymmetric power relationship between teachers and families. It becomes difficult, and in many cases impossible, for the family to be able to make demands on the educational system and to participate in school dynamics.

Finally, IFAN has observed that a large proportion of pupils, having spent several years in the same grade or in special remedial teaching programmes, have not yet made significant cognitive and social progress. This situation creates a negative image of the child within the school and family community, and undermines her or his self-confidence and motivation to continue learning. Additionally, families have a fear of losing the economic benefits they receive from federal support programmes, which are always conditioned on children’s continuing attendance to school.

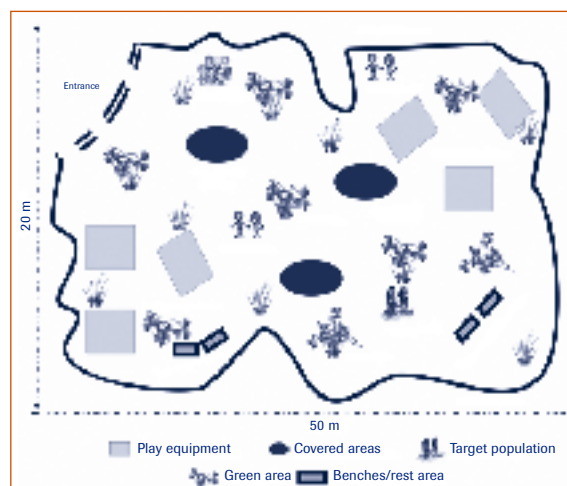
The Parques Infantis programme

The lessons learned by IFAN in its work on children’s transitions inspired a reorientation of the Parques Infantis (‘Children’s Outdoors’) programme in 2006. This programme is one of five components of a micro-regional intervention (PIRN) carried out by IFAN in the Macico de Baturite, in Ceará State.

Currently, the Parques Infantis programme is operating in the municipalities of Ocara, Mulungu and Itapiuna, with a total participation of 619 children and youth. One of their goals is to contribute to the development of a municipal policy on early childhood education and development.

By Parque Infantil, IFAN understands a physical space primarily for children but which also includes other social and demographic groups such as youth and adults. This well-defined

Figure: Layout of a Parque Infantil



physical space (see Figure) is managed by a local technical team, implementing a methodological framework supported by specific material resources. The team’s long-term objective is to formulate a Rural Children’s Agenda³. The Parques Infantis programme is a shared initiative of children, the community and municipal authorities.

The ‘Parques Infantis’ concept

IFAN developed the concept of Parques Infantis based on the following: (a) an analysis of childhood inspired by the Sociology of Childhood paradigm⁴, especially with regards to its four dimensions⁵; (b) a perception of children’s cultures based on their own group interpretative reproductions⁶; (c) an analysis of Parques Infantis inspired by the pioneering work of Mario de Andrade⁷, and defined by him as “a project for early childhood education”, aiming to stimulate children’s different cultural manifestations and assuring their right to “be children”; (d) a methodological proposal for early childhood education based on the flexible curricular components of the LDB 9394/96, which allows the integration of various forms of artistic expression (such as music, painting and drama) with bodily expression (physical and social) and linguistics (oral and written), according to a specific social reality.

The Parques Infantis programme is one of the first transitional experiences of poor rural children (3–6 years old) in the region. It is designed as a

developmental learning experience, able to support and prepare children for their transition to school life.

The key components of the programme are:

1. *Child participation.* Through play, children learn to negotiate their activities with other children, with the technical team of adolescents working in the Parques Infantis programme, and with their parents.
2. *Interpreting adult culture.* The programme also seeks to stimulate children to develop their own 'interpretative reproduction' of adult cultures through a series of art-related activities. The aim is to help children develop their own identity, which in turn allows them to make better use of educational opportunities when they enter the school cycle.
3. *Participative co-management.* The technical team (teenagers), parents and municipal authorities are in charge of the material maintenance and management of the Parques Infantis programme. The aim is to allow poor rural families to gain experience in negotiating with local authorities and to be able to confront new situations, at the same time ensuring the economic and material sustainability of the programme.
4. *Leisure activities complementary to the school curriculum.* The programme 'La hora do jogo' (for children aged 7–12) includes activities such as reading, writing, logical thinking and arts, all intended to promote the success of children in school. This is a common point of interest for the children, their parents, teachers, municipal education authorities and IFAN itself. While the Parques Infantis programme does not position itself as an alternative to schools, it does seek to inspire rural school teachers with regard to the opportunities offered by LDB 9394/96. In order to ensure this, the programme provides training for their technical teams (adolescents), especially in new pedagogical techniques. The teams then disseminate, by way of example, the new practices among young teachers.
5. *Promoting children's rights.* Community action is helping to promote awareness of children's rights among the rural population. There are plans to form sectoral stakeholder groups that will formulate the future Rural Children's Agenda, as a guide to municipal action in the areas of education, social services and health.

Future challenges

The current school model offers few opportunities for either children or their families to exert any influence over it. School transition programmes therefore need to create municipal inter-sectoral strategies with the aim of setting in motion a 'contextualisation' process among rural schools – a process that questions the dominant paradigm, namely that success in school is the sole responsibility of pupils and their families.

The Parques Infantis programme brings together children and their families in small rural communities where there are no schools. It is becoming an integrating factor in the region. The programme is helping to create a common identity among children, through shared play and cultural activities among peers, teenagers and adults. One can only assume that these children will, some time down the road, meet again at the same school. The project's challenge is to verify whether children's school readiness and performance are enhanced. Project implementation will provide the answers.

Notes

- 1 IFAN stands for the *Instituto da Infância*, the Childhood Institute. Located in northeast Brazil, IFAN is a not-for-profit association that generates new knowledge on childhood issues, both through lessons learned from the practice and through innovative paradigms about childhood. Its aim is to contribute to the design of new social technologies focused on childhood and to promote new public policies at the municipal level. Established in 1999, IFAN is headquartered in Fortaleza, Ceará State.
- 2 Childhood is that biological period in the life of a human being, socially defined as a child. Rural childhood refers to that early period when life habits and learning are permeated by the rural family's economic activity, such as food-crop production, herding or silviculture (IFAN, 2005: Institutional Strategic Planning).
- 3 The Rural Children's Agenda is a holistic policy approach that departs from the concept of rural children as active social actors. The expected Agenda will define strategic areas for child well-being to be addressed by municipal intervention. It is inspired by New Zealand's Agenda for Children: Making Life Better for Children, 2002 (IFAN, 2005: Institutional Strategic Planning).
- 4 This term refers to a new perspective in the field of

- childhood studies. It understands childhood as a 'social category', which varies according to the historical moment and social context. This paradigm questions the existence of a unique childhood concept with a universal character. J. Goddard et al. (2005). *The Politics of Childhood*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 188-189.
- 5 The four childhood dimensions are: a) childhood as an age group; b) childhood institutional arrangements; c) inter-generational relations; and d) relations among children. Patricia Adler and Peter Adler (2003). *Peer Power*, Rutgers University Press, p.11-16.
 - 6 The concept of 'interpretative reproduction' refers to the collective participation of children in the appropriation of adult cultures, its collective re-creation by children's peers groups and its reproduction and change in wider adult society. W. Corsaro (2005). *The Sociology of Childhood*, Pine Forge Press, p. 26.
 - 7 Brazilian writer and pioneer of Parques Infantis concept during his period as Municipal Secretary of Culture in the city of Sao Paulo (1935–1938). *Childhood*. Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.
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