


## **Infâncias sem fronteiras: migração, amizade e interculturalidade entre crianças bolivianas e brasileiras**

Childhoods without borders: migration, friendship and interculturality  
between Bolivian and Brazilian children

Infancias sin fronteras: migración, amistad e interculturalidad entre niños  
bolivianos y brasileños

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### **RESUMO**

O artigo tem como objetivo contribuir com os estudos referentes à migração internacional na infância, à educação das crianças desde bebês e às políticas públicas da população migrante. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa realizada com uma turma de crianças bolivianas e brasileiras com 4 anos de idade numa Escola Municipal de Educação Infantil na cidade de São Paulo, fazendo o uso do registro do diário de bordo do professor-pesquisador com ações interculturais entre criança-criança, adulto-criança, bem como de desenhos das crianças e da observação participante. Com base nas análises, pode-se destacar que as amizades se constituem como aspecto representativo das diferenças nas experiências de meninas e meninos de diversas nacionalidades no interior das culturas infantis. As crianças bolivianas e brasileiras juntas transgrediam as barreiras do espaço educativo, construía arranjos linguísticos, corporais, afetivos para relações étnico-raciais e de gênero, percepções sobre o fenômeno da migração e refúgio na infância vivida em tempos de resistência contra a barbárie.

**Palavras-chave:** Migração; Amizade; Educação Infantil.

### **ABSTRACT**

The article aims to contribute to studies related to international migration in childhood, the education of children from infants, and public policies for migrant populations. This is a qualitative research carried out with a class of 4-year-old Bolivian and Brazilian

children in a Municipal School of Early Childhood Education in the city of São Paulo, using the record of the teacher-researcher's logbook with intercultural actions between child-child, adult-child, as well as children's drawings and participant observation. Based on the analyses, it can be highlighted that friendships are a representative aspect of the differences in the experiences of girls and boys of different nationalities within peer cultures. Together the Bolivian and Brazilian children transgressed the barriers of the educational space, built linguistic, bodily, affective arrangements for ethnic-racial and gender relations, perceptions about the phenomenon of migration and refuge in childhood lived in times of resistance against barbarism.

**Keywords:** Migration; Friendship; Early Childhood Education.

## RESUMEN

El artículo tiene como objetivo contribuir a los estudios sobre la migración internacional en la infancia, a la educación de los niños desde la infancia y a las políticas públicas para la población migrante. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa realizada con una clase de niños bolivianos y brasileños de 4 años de edad en una Escuela Municipal de Educación Parvularia de la ciudad de São Paulo, utilizando el registro de la bitácora del profesor-investigador con acciones interculturales entre niño-niño, adulto-niño, así como dibujos infantiles y observación participante. A partir de los análisis, se puede destacar que las amistades son un aspecto representativo de las diferencias en las experiencias de niñas y niños de diferentes nacionalidades dentro de las culturas infantiles. Juntos los niños bolivianos y brasileños transgredieron las barreras del espacio educativo, construyeron arreglos lingüísticos, corporales, afectivos para las relaciones étnico-raciales y de género, percepciones sobre el fenómeno de la migración y el refugio en la infancia vivida en tiempos de resistencia contra la barbarie.

**Palabras clave:** Migración; Amistad; Educación Infantil.

## Introduction

Within São Paulo's educational sphere, the Municipal Secretariat of Education (*Secretaria Municipal de Educação - SME*), through its Center for Education on Ethnic-Racial Relations (*Núcleo de Educação para as Relações Étnico-Raciais - NEER*), has sought to guarantee all migrant children, adolescents, young people, and adults the right to education by ensuring their access, retention, and completion<sup>1</sup>. In this context, it is important to analyze the coexistence among children, here, in early childhood

education, and how the space has been gradually created and recreated to safeguard the right to life. These educational spaces are organized and experienced in such a way that both international migrant children and Brazilian children can acquire the status of subjects, come to know themselves and one another, and establish possible new relationships.

Children take part in organizing educational spaces and convey their wishes to adults. Here, I draw on the notion of children as social actors who display protagonism and agency (Qvortrup; Corsaro; Honig, 2011). As Barbosa (2014) explains, from a very young age children transform and create new generational ways of being in the world, that is, they create childhood cultures<sup>ii</sup>. Acknowledging children's potential to express themselves through multiple languages: glances, smiles, silences, cries, and so on, not only through speech but also through their movements, play, and cultural productions and expressions, I analyzed the experiences that emerge from the formation of friendships. I identified the strategies Bolivian and Brazilian children devise to live out their childhoods within São Paulo's early childhood education settings, as well as the meanings they assign to migratory processes through those friendships and the accompanying educational activities<sup>iii</sup>.

The situations that arose during the fieldwork were recorded in the class logbook, which contains the intercultural interactions between child-child and child-adult<sup>iv</sup>. This logbook is the teacher-researcher's written tool in schools for documenting everyday school events: his feelings, concerns, frustrations, and achievements; what he did; the children's attitudes; the proposed actions; as well as the relationship of these events to theories already studied or new ones that may emerge, thereby enabling reflection on his teaching practice and its transformation (Alarcão, 2011; Zabalza, 2004).

The study set out to characterize children's condition: playing and doing things together, becoming friends, confronting one another, reproducing and also transforming social relations, sparking creative processes, and valuing children's cultures in all their diversity.

It is also important to emphasize that, throughout this research, the children's acceptance was essential. It was expressed not simply because I was their teacher, but through their empathy: the welcoming look they gave me each morning when I arrived; the unexpected hugs, despite the need for distancing and face masks to protect us from the coronavirus; their requests that I crouch down so they could speak into my ear; and the moments when I could play with them both in the classroom and on the playground. In this way, our shared experiences: our anxieties, joys, games, laughter, and tears, became a kind of process of mutual recognition, of observing our singularities, of humanization, and they shaped our relationships day after day.

In my logbook entries and in this study, I omitted the names of the individuals and the Municipal Early Childhood Education School (*Escola Municipal de Educação Infantil* - EMEI) for ethical reasons, safeguarding the participants' right to privacy. The names that appear are fictitious and were chosen on the basis that they did not exist in the setting during the fieldwork period. Each person's gender was also respected. The drawings were gifts from the children to the teacher-researcher, and the depicted scenes form part of the class logbook. This research is backed by Ethics Committee approval no. 5.168.114.

In this study, the qualitative approach was implemented flexibly. I therefore tried to ensure that the participants (children and teachers) felt comfortable with the methodological procedures and were aware of my role, while also taking care that people in the research setting would not perceive me as an "outsider," someone intruding on their private daily lives. Some degree of estrangement was certainly necessary for constructing the investigation, and it was essential to "step outside oneself": to move beyond what one did every day in the educational space, in order to view reality differently. As Neto (2004) points out, this reading of the world is expanded through contact with the research subjects, but it should be remembered that, for the participants, such involvement must also be welcoming and trustworthy.

In educational research, there are many variants of the observation method. These variants are classified according to the degree of the researcher's participation in the observations (Lüdke & André, 1986). In this study, participant observation

focused on a preschool class and on investigating the school itself, that is, my own workplace context. This methodological procedure “is carried out through the researcher’s direct contact with the phenomenon observed, with the purpose of obtaining information about the reality of social actors in their own contexts”<sup>v</sup> (Neto, 2004, p. 59). According to Martins Filho (2008), participant observation has been a strong point in studies with children during their play, interactions, relationships, productions, experiments, and dialogues within educational spaces.

### **International migrant children in the EMEI and the participant class**

Although there are mobilizations by civil society to promote the reception of migrants and people in refugee situations<sup>vi</sup>, it is also evident, when political actions are observed, that nation-states erect barriers to avoid what they see as an overload of social problems that would stem from opening their borders. According to Sayad (1998), it is in migrant and refugee persons that the confrontation with the national order is realized in the form of lived experience. They would represent a kind of limit to the perfection expected of the national order. Their presence unmasks the national order’s fragilities, lays bare the arbitrariness of its premises and embodies danger because they stand outside the common world, outside the idea of the national world.

The process of international migration, triggered by various factors such as environmental disasters, wars, political, ethnic, or cultural persecution, and the search for work and better living conditions, has by no means come to a halt. In South America, Brazil has in recent years received a considerable number of migrants and people in refugee situations, posing a challenge for state and municipal authorities.

Accompanied by their families or, not infrequently, unaccompanied, children follow the flow of life in an attempt to find new prospects and protection. From this perspective, Bhabha (2014) observes that the relationship of dependence between the child and an adult has been a constant in migratory processes and in related studies, given that the presence of children is generally linked to female migration and to family migration. It should also be stressed that a child in a context of migration, refuge, or

forced displacement is exposed to multiple vulnerabilities: the child may experience a solitary, deprived childhood, fail to attend public educational spaces, and face serious health problems. Such issues are connected to child labor or labor analogous to slavery, human trafficking, or adoption, as well as to the “special challenges” faced by border authorities responsible for receiving the child or “unaccompanied minor” (IOM, 2009, p. 40).

An analysis of the age variable in data on population movements reveals a growing migratory flow composed of people under 14 years of age (UNICEF, 2020). This rise in the number of children in international migratory flows, together with their increased visibility in different contexts, can, depending on how societies address the issue, help lift the children themselves, their experiences, and childhood as a whole out of silence.

Several studies point to the difficulty education-system networks face in obtaining data on the migrant population (Magalhães, 2010; Waldman, 2012; Norões, 2016; Braga, 2019). Seeking to gather such data at the Municipal Early Childhood Education School (*Escola Municipal de Educação Infantil - EMEI*), I approached the pedagogical coordinator and the administration to request the attendance lists for the sixteen classes, which were divided into morning and afternoon shifts. Once enrollment had been finalized at the end of April 2022, the lists were provided. I then contacted the homeroom teachers and asked them to identify, on those lists, the international migrant children, drawing on the children’s full names and on the contact the teachers already maintained with their families.

After receiving this information, on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, I contacted the Educational Technical Assistants working in the EMEI’s office; they promptly accessed the SME’s online registration system, Online School (*Escola Online - EOL*), to confirm the nationalities of the children and their guardians. The search identified 81 international migrant children from South American and Asian countries out of a total of 478 enrolled students; no children from Central America, North America, or Africa were found in the EMEI studied, as shown numerically in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – International migrants at the EMEI

South America	Number of enrolments	Asia and Europe	Number of enrolments
Argentina	1	India	1
Bolivia	72	Russia	1
Paraguay	1		
Peru	2		
Venezuela	3		
Total	79	Total	2

Source: SME/Open Data Portal – Prepared by the researcher (2022).

International migrant children account for 17% of the students at the EMEI. Bolivian children are the most numerous, making up 14% of that total. Brazilian children add up to 83%, a total of 398. It is worth noting that, although I did not find any African children at the EMEI, they are present in the region. As Santiago (2022) points out, African children and families live mostly in the center or on the outskirts of the city of São Paulo.

Every class has, on average, 3 to 9 international migrant children. Among these children, 36 are boys and 44 are girls, as we can see in Table 2 below:

Table 2 – International migrant boys and girls at the EMEI

Nationality	Boys	Girls
Argentina	0	1
Bolivia	33	39
India	0	1
Paraguay	0	1
Peru	2	0
Venezuela	2	1
Russia	0	1
Total	37	44

Source: SME/Open Data Portal – Prepared by the researcher (2022).



It is also observed that, proportionally, there is no discrepancy between the numbers of international migrant boys and girls attending the EMEI.

The participant class is made up of 29 four-year-old children: 25 Brazilian and 4 Bolivian. Of this total, nineteen are boys and ten are girls. The four Bolivian children comprise one boy and three girls.

Identifying the origins of the international migrant children at the EMEI was a necessary step. Recognizing where they come from was indispensable for examining the everyday actions that dialogued with the knowledge, skills, and cultural baggage present in the children's experiences as they lived their childhoods within the educational space and thus valued diversity.

Social relations among people do not arise from their mere physical or subjective presence or from the existence of two or more persons, though their presence is required for relations to materialize. Beyond the biological aspects that allow people to interact, relations are built through sociocultural meanings that position individuals vis-à-vis one another, as we can observe in Drawing 1, by João, a Brazilian boy in the participant class, below:



Drawing 1

"It's us playing in the park" - João, 4 years-old

Reproduction of the drawing made by João, a Brazilian boy, in crayon on white paper upon returning from the park (2022).



To understand what a drawing represents for children one must always ask them. As adults, we often forget to pose questions and to watch the children while they draw. At times we simply collect the drawings and consider only the final product, leaving the process aside. Aware of this, and having taught children since infancy, I make a point of observing their choice of crayons, the position of the sheet of paper, and the strokes and scribbles they produce at the very moment of recording.

Some time later, at the end of the school year, when I showed João the picture of the park he had made, he commented: "I remember that day. Teacher, it's awesome. Can we go there today to play in the park? We won't make a mess in the classroom, okay?". I replied that we could go right after we finished the activity of reviewing what we had done at school (Field diary, 6 December 2022). It is worth noting that although I, as a teacher-researcher, was organizing the class activities in time and space and seeking the children's perceptions of them, I am not exempt from at some point acting as an adult who overrides the wishes of girls and boys. Breaking with adult-centrism is a constant exercise.

Looked at from this perspective of recollection, the drawing can be regarded as the children's own personal research and, as such, it represents achievements: rehearsals in which worlds are imagined and relationships are built. In João's drawing the park is a more important place for the children in early childhood education than the classroom itself.

Hence, understanding the interactive space children establish in their play is an aspect that must be taken into account when we seek to comprehend the presence of international migrant children together with Brazilian children at the EMEI. During play in the park, children can experience greater autonomy and can forge relationships in contact with diversity and difference (Pereira, 2021a).

## **Bonds and shared actions among Bolivian and Brazilian children**

The observations and data gathered in the field revealed that the relationships nurtured by Bolivian and Brazilian children were the very means through which they sought to forge ties, in this case, attempts to get to know one another and to sustain friendships with the other. What follows are some encounters that illustrated this.

We went down from our classroom to use the six star-shaped sand pits, each about one meter across, located in an outdoor area beside the playground. The class was excited, it had been days since we had visited that space because of a long spell of rain in the region. The children played with the buckets, shovels, and rakes scattered inside the pits, moving from one sand box to another while talking and playing with each other. The three Bolivian girls: María, Paola, and Ximena, had gathered together and were playing as a trio. Ximena and María laughed as they tipped the sand-filled buckets out of their molds. Another group of children was in the adjacent playground, running back and forth and playing on the equipment. I noticed a group of girls from that other class come up to the fence that separated the playground from the sand-pit area. One of them shouted, "Guys, look, it's my friend. She doesn't talk." Paola quickly got up from where she was with María and Ximena and ran to the fence. The Brazilian girls said, "Hi." In response Paola waved with both hands and hugged her friend through the bars. A few minutes later they said goodbye and everyone went back to the games they had been playing before.

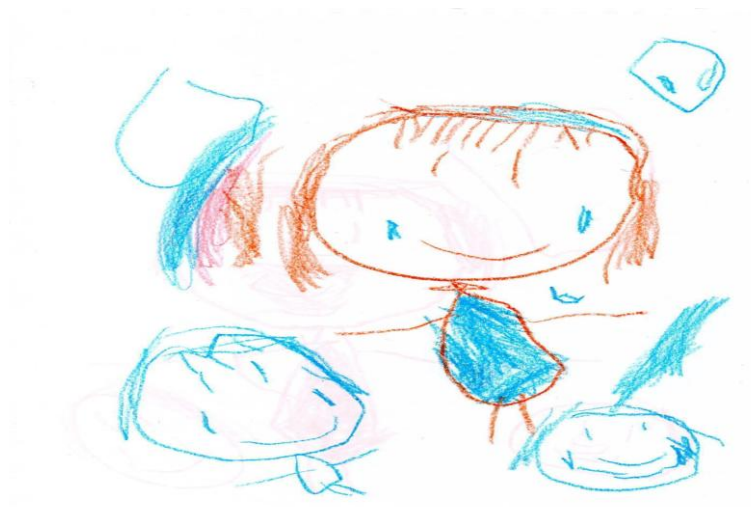
The disciplinary society, whose techniques and procedures of domination are internalized by subjects, making them docile and submissive within a disciplinary structure in which the school functions as a regulating and normative institution, has always been a problem we must confront. The relations between power and knowledge, as they appear in modern educational practices, find in the model of school education a powerful disciplining of bodies (Foucault, 1991; 1995).

The bars that blocked access from one area to another throughout the EMEI marked the subordination that tied the school's rituals to discipline and control. Through pedagogical actions developed in the sphere of early childhood education, processes of initiation into capital and of linking subjects to the social structures ideologically constructed by capitalism are created. This initiation process is not limited to the teacher's work alone; it is also built through the different elements that compose the space: figures, objects, and so forth.

Although the girls were separated by the bars dividing the playground from the sandbox, in the encounter described above it was possible to observe that, while using the materials and toys available according to their habitual dispositions, the children broke through the barriers that delimited their interactions, thereby establishing bonds and friendships.

The Bolivian girls Paola, María, and Ximena always played together, sometimes with Brazilian girls as well, though not as consistently. At various moments in the class routine the Bolivian girls produced drawings that registered this bond, as we can see in Drawing 2 below by Ximena, a Bolivian girl in the group. Through their interactions, the children were able to build stable relationships, thereby enhancing their encounters.

Bolivian girls



Drawing 2

"Ellos y yo" - Ximena, 4 years-old

Reproduction of the drawing made by Ximena, a Bolivian girl, in crayon on white paper, in the classroom (2022).

In the relationships among children, the diversity of lived experiences shapes childhood, which is recognizably composed of multiple others. At the end of the school year, as soon as Ximena revisited the drawing she had made of herself with María and

Paola, her Bolivian classmates, she remarked: “*Yo y mis amigas. Profesor, ahora tengo más amigas en la escuela. ¿Puedo ir al baño?*” (Field diary, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022). María referred to the friendship she had built over the year with Brazilian girls from other classes, who also recognized her with the same status of friendship.

In these encounters involving Bolivian children within the Brazilian educational space, as Gonçalves (2018) highlights, they are dreaming, displaying their everyday lives, playing with their peers and with Brazilian children, in short, creating a way of being a child. Always playing together, regardless of the other children present: this is a condition of friendships among children that resonates with the self-descriptions of Black girls who saw themselves as “special friends” in early childhood settings, a perception understood through the notion of the “House of Difference” (Lorde, 1982) in Pereira’s (2020) master’s research.

As Ferreira (2004, p. 73) states, this practice involves “the social uses of the body, combined with social-interaction strategies in which socio-relational skills and knowledge acquired in family and community relations, along with certain socio-emotional resources, are differentially mobilized.”<sup>vii</sup> In other words, it is through their bodies that children energize experiences of proximity or distance as shared actions unfold.

Thus, the Brazilian girls and Paola, the Bolivian girl, in the encounter described in the sandbox area, recognized that the other is truly other, with difference and unpredictability; no stigmatization of the former by the latter was observed, they were friends. Despite the language barrier perceived by the group, the girls interacted smoothly whenever they met in the EMEI’s spaces.

As Sestini (2008) notes, people develop both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, and various non-verbal signals can replace speech. For example, a wave instead of saying something, a gesture used by Paola and the Brazilian girls. Hence, the strategies adopted by the Bolivian children to gain access to games and groups and to build friendships occurred through non-verbal actions.

Bond formation thus stemmed from close contact and the habitual disposition of sharing the same space; in other words, language was not an obstacle for children’s

interactions and friendship-building in child-child relations. The opposite, however, took place in adult-child relations, in the encounter that follows.

I was in the classroom reading that day's story.  
All of a sudden, a teacher from another group walked in and made a request:  
"Teacher, could you talk to my Bolivian student? I can't understand what he wants to say."  
"Yes, I can," I replied.  
"Hola, ¿cómo te llamas?"  
"Juan."  
"¿Todo bien?"  
The child smiled. I asked:  
"¿Qué quieres, Juan?"  
"Quiero a mi mamá. ¡Dijo que vendría por mí y no lo hizo!"  
(Field diary, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

The language barrier becomes most evident when the children have to interact with teachers who are unfamiliar with other languages, or even with variations of Portuguese itself. From this perspective, Alexandre (2019), in her doctoral research, notes that Haitian migrant children's difficulties at school concern learning and communicating with teachers, because the latter lack knowledge of certain cultural notions and of Portuguese itself.

During the fieldwork it was observed that, over time, migrant children overcome these linguistic barriers either on their own or with help from friends. By playing together, as we saw in the encounter between the sandbox and the playground, Bolivian and Brazilian children were actively constructing themselves.

Undoubtedly, children's communicative capacity must always be acknowledged. Their actions constitute a continual re-creation of culture and form the foundation of the dynamics involved in children's socialization processes (Martins Filho, 2008). Socialization is therefore also understood as an effect of the relationships among the Bolivian and Brazilian children themselves.

Throughout the research I noticed that acceptance within peer groups, among Bolivian and Brazilian children, occurred mainly when they were in the playground and the cafeteria, larger areas than, for example, the classroom. Although the Bolivian children were more reserved, little by little they established friendships and affinities and maintained the group's games and activities. This contrasts with Resstel's (2014)

master's research on six-to-twelve-year-old migrant children, offspring of dekassegui families returning to Brazil, in which identification with Brazilian culture and friends did not occur immediately because of unfamiliarity with Portuguese and feelings of shame.

Being in contact with children to understand them, and their childhoods, requires that we venture to observe their play, movements, gestures, smiles, exchanged hugs, tears, silences, and (in)differences. The challenge, as Munanga (2014, p. 35) clarifies, is to combine "the right to be at once equal and different," since bodily and cultural differences must never become a pretext for inequalities in rights and respect. From the standpoint of nationality and political democracy, it is untenable to imagine, for example, a single, harmonious Brazilian society, for that would deny the racism, xenophobia, and sexism that hierarchize and render differences invisible. Likewise, justifying power structures on allegedly "innate" differences is equally unacceptable.

Very often, in early childhood education settings, hierarchies grounded in a mistaken articulation of differences are reproduced by people; yet these same spaces can also serve as contexts for overcoming discrimination and valuing difference. As Dias (2015) observes, children are reinventing various aspects of social life, including differences, through their everyday actions.

In the following encounter, a bond has already been forged between the Bolivian and Brazilian girls, whose expressions reveal shared perspectives, sensitivities, silences, and demands for respect.

The children in the class were playing with interlocking blocks in the classroom. María and Ximena were seated at a table together with Fernanda and Rodrigo, two Brazilian children. I noticed that Fernanda had assembled something resembling a comb and a hair dryer. She stood up and began to pretend she was combing María's hair. Ximena smiled and, at the same time, held one of María's hands during the "hair-styling." Rodrigo, watching the scene, tugged the end of María's hair and laughed. Fernanda, alert to the situation, called him to order: "Rodrigo, you can't do that. Apologize." She then quickly ran over to me and reported what had happened. I asked what had occurred. Rodrigo immediately replied, "Teacher, I didn't do anything." Fernanda insisted that he apologize. The boy finally did so. María nodded yes, accepting the apology. (Field diary, April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

That moment refers to a standing activity that took place during the class's daily routine. The gestures of María, Ximena, Fernanda, and Rodrigo can be understood as

“affirmations in which the child responds to a previous question, invitation, or command made by another participant, or justifies why he or she acted, or failed to act, in a given way”<sup>viii</sup> (Sestini, 2008, p. 75). In this sense, friendship between the Bolivian and Brazilian children brings together shared perceptions, affections, actions, and principles that have no intrinsic value; their meaning depends on one’s relationship with the other, the context in which one lives, and the opportunities available for social interaction.

The girls continued their hair-combing game. Rodrigo went on fitting the pieces together. I noticed that after the moment when Rodrigo apologized, the Bolivian girls began to play more, both with him and with the other boys in the class. (Field diary, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

It can be observed that the Bolivian and Brazilian children displayed real rapport during play; to interact in groups they drew on various strategies, devising their own mechanisms to overcome the difficulties they encountered when trying to establish contact with the group. Corsaro (2011) helps us interpret this dynamic by noting that, in attempting to surmount obstacles to gaining access to others, children create their own approaches for getting closer.

It is important to highlight that each strategy elicited a response that could be either positive or negative. Children tend to protect their shared spaces from newcomers, and those wishing to join an interaction often need to align their actions with those of the group or risk exclusion (Ferreira, 2004).

In this light, Rodrigo’s action can also be viewed as a strategy of proximity: the child used bodily language to initiate interaction in hopes of achieving some form of reciprocity, an effort that could either permit or block his participation in the play with the girls seated at the same table.

## **Bolivian and Brazilian children question the world**

Early childhood education is a context shaped by interaction, touch, affection, and physical closeness, a setting in which children engage with one another, with the space around them, with material objects, and with different textual genres. Such



experiences give them contact with realities that often lay bare the material conditions of existence. The weekly educational proposal devised for the EMEI classes, described below, is an example of this encounter:

During the week's collective planning, all of the EMEI groups would read the picture book "The girl who embraces the wind: the story of a Congolese refugee" (*A menina que abraça o vento: a história de uma refugiada congoleza*) by Fernanda Paraguassu. The book tells the story of Mersene, a child who must leave part of her family behind to escape the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo and who gradually adapts to a new life in Brazil. According to the author, the narrative was inspired by the real experiences of several Congolese girls living as refugees in the city of Rio de Janeiro. In her encounters with these families, Paraguassu observed the children's ability to overcome pain and homesickness through play, for example. One of the objectives set out in the lesson plan was for the teaching staff to address this theme with the children. (Field diary, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

Literature in early childhood education is of extreme importance, for, within stories and tales, we have a problem or drama to be resolved; it is a fact that children in this age group do not perceive this gravely, but they already begin, little by little, to learn to face life in a playful way. Sometimes, the children put themselves in the place of the characters, experiencing what happens to them.

The class was waiting to hear the day's story, the children knew that, in our routine, on Wednesdays we did storytelling and circle time as part of the permanent activities. I introduced the character Mersene and explained what the story was about. Fabrício, a Brazilian boy, commented: "Teacher, I saw on TV at home that there are children fleeing from the war" (referring to the war in Ukraine). I confirmed that we would talk about that. Next, I began the telling of the children's story. At the same time that I read, the children wanted to appreciate the book's illustrations, prompting me to walk around the room showing the images. I noticed that María and Ximena, always together, were holding hands while they listened to the story. Einar, a Bolivian boy, always quiet, smiling, remarked: "*Sí, eso es muy bonito*," pointing his finger at the images. (Field diary, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

This activity with the children in the class, beyond enabling the construction of knowledge in Early Childhood Education about the issue of migrant and refugee people, provoked a process of greater interest on their part regarding their bodies, their differences. Even before we began the circle time, I noticed their enthusiasm and their understanding, even if preliminary, of the subject, as Fabrício commented. Both the girls and the boys approached the theme in a curious and sensitive way; they

welcomed the educational proposal, although they were anxious and restless while waiting for playground time.

Teacher, Mersene has hair just like mine, said Priscila. Yes, her hair is curly and black like yours, I replied. Next, Roberta commented, It's like mine too. We are Black. (Field diary, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

It is from this perspective presented by the Brazilian Black girls Priscila and Roberta that children's stories enable children to recognize themselves ethnically and racially in a positive way and to understand the world in which they are inserted, which is also important for international migrant children with Black skin tone. As Bano (2019) points out in her master's research with African migrant and refugee children, xenophobia is an issue that can affect refugees and migrants in general, regardless of age or nationality; racial prejudice, however, is an issue that can affect all Black refugees and migrants.

The aesthetics of the Congolese girl Mersene enhances a displacement from the Eurocentric vision of beauty and identity formation, creating an interlocution with the image of Black boys and girls. The visual and written language of the book, centered on a refugee child living in a new country, who creates a game to overcome longing for friends, for her school, for her country of origin, promotes self-recognition and group belonging, which confers culture and ways of relating to the body and to the relationships that constitute society. Knowing that, historically, Black, migrant, and refugee people have been placed at the margins of human rights, discussing these processes of political awareness from childhood, observing social values as part of a human project, also enables the understanding of how and where people locate themselves in relation to culture.

Might the girls and boys in the class be constructing notions of respect, in such a way as to promote the welcoming of those who arrive in a new country? Might they be creating a process of empathy with migrant and refugee children, and among themselves? And for those who have begun to live with a friend who came from outside the country and needs to learn a new language, how can they help?

Among the Bolivian children in the class, Paola was the one who interacted the most with the other children. María and Ximena interacted little and were more reserved. Einar also remained silent; he was often absent from classes, and during the period of field research he did not attend the external spaces of the Educational Unit, only very little the classroom, the cafeteria, and the bathrooms, that is, the internal spaces. When we listen to stories about migrant and refugee people we enrich even more our examples of experiences, besides feeling integrated into a world where we realize we are not alone. The fact of finding stories based on conflicts and realities like our own removes the idea of isolation, for these stories present a life example that awakens in us the desire to seek other types of relations and solutions to problems, such as conversations and exchanges. In the case of children who live with the same intensity as an adult, when they hear stories that have a child as protagonist within their own reality, this enables, as we saw in the encounter above, that they feel safe to talk about a subject raised by the story, as the boys Fabrício and Einar and the girls Priscila and Roberta indeed did.

Thinking about the story of Mersene, the Congolese refugee girl, which created a space for exchanges, without direct exposure, allowing the children to share points of view and awakening interest in new experiences, I brought to the class the news report about the war in Ukraine that Fabrício had said he had seen on television. Days earlier, the teaching team had already planned during the collective planning time to bring the news genre carrier from newspapers for the children to have contact with, in order to enrich their learning. Thus, I read to the class the news “War in Ukraine: eleven-year-old boy flees the country alone on a 1,200-km journey,” from the BBC News Brazil website.

The case of Hassan, a Ukrainian boy, occurred on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022. He lives in Zaporizhzhia, a city where the nuclear power plant has been the target of bombings in eastern Ukraine. The boy left home alone with a plastic bag, a backpack, his passport, and the phone number of relatives in Slovakia written in pen on his hand, in search of refuge. The boy left the country without his family because his mother had to take care of his grandmother, who is elderly. He boarded a train and, when he crossed the

border, he was received by customs officials on Slovak territory, receiving water and food from volunteers while they contacted his relatives.

Choosing between one material or another to be worked on with the children is an important part of addressing issues about migration and refuge processes in childhood, because the choice of materials, stories, toys — and all the other elements that are offered to the children — needs to be thought of as an essential part in building an intercultural education oriented towards processes of respect, empathy, and welcoming.

In the circle time I noticed that the children showed affection, empathy, and respect for one another. Priscila would always stand up to walk among the tables. And during the discussion of the case of the boy Hassan, she went over to Paola's table. She sat beside her and the two held hands. Einar was gently stroking the face of Pietro, a Brazilian boy, while they listened to their classmates' comments. The children played together at the same time that they took part in the circle. Next, the class recorded the reading of the news report. (Field diary, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

Children are agents of transformation from the earliest age; they are people with whom it is necessary to dialogue in order to establish and maintain relationships through contact and the exercise of alterity. During the circle time with the class about Hassan's story, I confirmed that the children were continually re-signifying the material conditions that were available to them. As Pecsí and Fusaro (2019) point out in their master's research with Syrian children older than six, for them the school is where one learns the language and new codes, but also where they re-signify their existences, remake bonds, and connect to the host society by exchanging experiences with other people.

Gusmão (1999) elucidates that relationships imprint on people's gaze and perception value schemes that guide the stances of some toward others. In this case, what might contact with the story of Hassan, a Ukrainian refugee boy who had to flee his city and stay far from his home, his family, his friend(s), and his school because of a conflict, represent for the children in the class?

Einar, a Bolivian boy, drawing on his own experience in the meeting of April 4<sup>th</sup>, revealed in his drawings his concern with the war, indicating that children are in the

world and not in a world apart. Among the countless culturally materialized signs produced by the boys and girls in the class, Drawing 3 below lays bare the effects of war and bombings, of conflicts, of human miseries:

War



Drawing 3

*"Son personas que huyen de la guerra" - Einar, 4 años*

Reproduction of the drawing made by Einar, a Bolivian boy, on white paper with colored pencil, in the classroom (2022).

I was walking around the room, observing what all the children were drawing. That was when Einar handed me his drawing, saying, "*He terminado, y esto es para ti!*" What would Einar's drawing represent, then, I asked. In response, the boy explained: "*Son personas que huyen de la guerra.*" (Field diary, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

The strokes, the curves, the shading, the black and white, the Bolivian speech and presence of the boy Einar, independent of the conception of children's drawings as cultural artifacts within childhood cultures, led me to a question: In a certain way, does Einar produce art using an inner, heart-centered consciousness, in such a

manner that it does not depend on analysis or questions based on logic, reason, or intellect?

Einar brings the richness of the choices and achievements he made while drawing in his fullness. He represented his experiences as a Bolivian migrant child, attentive to the world, to things, to people, to feelings, to the information to which he has access, to the educational proposals, with his curious gaze, his still limited interaction with me and the other children in the class, his experience in the educational space where few or no people spoke his mother tongue, he reveals his perception regarding the war between Russia and Ukraine.

An airplane full of people flying over an area being bombarded by missiles. The grey sky, covered by the toxic clouds that Einar's drawing portrayed, left me with a lump in my throat. His work stirred my emotions, for an avalanche of images, texts, readings, things that dealt with migratory processes in childhood was there, hovering in my mind. Connected, intense, pulsating, my object of research, the slice of reality about which the problem of my study, and on which I was acting both practically and theoretically, revolves, burst open in my face, before my eyes.

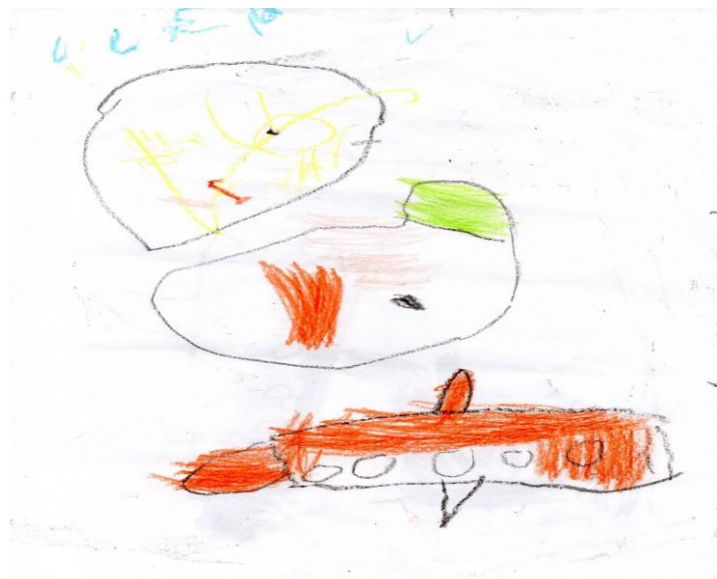
Thus, children's drawings, as singular expressions of child protagonism, also materialize the life experience through which children display their questioning of the world. In treating children's drawings with this peculiarity, Gobbi (2014, p. 154) points out that: "As iconographic truth, it is not an expression of neutrality or of the whole that is represented there. It is invention, fantasy; it keeps elements of imagination."<sup>ix</sup> As a symbolic network based on experience lived and conceived.

Although Einar's drawing possesses this peculiarity, the child nonetheless enables us, through his representation, to reflect on how difficult the search for shelter, for refuge is when we are faced with death, hunger, barbarity, however hard it may be to imagine or however much we may wish not to believe. Here, I refer to the reflections brought by Mbembe (2017) on the politics of control over bodies, which feed on themselves from time to time, constituting a domain of knowledge that places population and demographic phenomena at the center of discussions throughout the world.



Drawing 4, below, shows these moments of resuming activities and consolidates knowledge; it represents the creative force that the Bolivian boy Einar projects into the world, in order to create the new, to establish new relations among different people, other forms of existence. Remembering that we can perceive this active character in children's creations only when we give eyes and ears to children, when we break with adult-centrism, which curtails the views we hold about what it is to experience childhood, when we look beyond adult obviousness.

Refuge



Drawing 4

*"És el avión llegando" - Einar, 4 años*

Reproduction of the drawing made by Einar, a Bolivian boy, on white paper with colored pencil, in the classroom (2022).

Here it is necessary to understand that children's drawings change according to culture, to the period, to the presence or absence of supports for imagination and creation processes. When we conceptualize drawings as products of children's cultures, we must observe them as graphic and visual records that result from acts of listening and that, as a legacy, bear the historical marks of each child; they make visible



the trajectories of dreams, desires, experiences shared with a group of children, with adults, or individually.

In these difficult times, the hope for better days, the arrival of people in a new country, as Einar shows in his drawing, in our renewed personal experiences, can be conceived as forms of resistance, here understood not as a mere reaction to the powers of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2018) that plague the world, but precisely as another way of existing.

Especially if we think of resistance as the affirmation of life processes in which childhood, children, literature, and politics express the creative powers that, amid the rubble, announce other ways of living, of establishing relationships, of building friendships, of practicing intercultural education with international migrant and Brazilian children in early childhood education and in society.

The children's narratives, when, alone or in small groups, they build their ways of organizing experience, knowledge, and the doings of life, bestow and share meanings, imagine and construct symbolic worlds; they are essays that belong to the elaboration of childhood experience (Bruner, 1997). This underlies children's participation in social interactions and also in the construction of technique, culture, and science (Vygotsky, 2009).

At the end of the school year, when everyone in the class was already familiar with one another, I revisited the news report on Hassan, the Ukrainian boy, and I also showed some photos of the class on the classroom television, images of them playing in the various outdoor areas of the EMEI. Reliving their play in the playground, their moments with the toys along the side of the school, their cakes and castles in the sandbox, the children became euphoric at the scenes on the screen. They laughed at one another, saying, "Look at you! Look at you!" Priscila walked among her classmates, approached Paola, her Bolivian friend, and said, "That day we picked leaves to make a campfire." Paola, nodding, replied, "Sí," and hugged her friend. (Field diary, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

In that space-time with the class, the children and I exchanged knowledge and experiences, talking with one another. This is always a process carried out with people, but always people in search, people who are forming themselves, re-orienting themselves, refining, articulating culture, in order to be subjects of their own humanization.

Roberta showed concern for Hassan, the Ukrainian boy from the report, asking: “Teacher, has he already gone back home? My mom said the war still isn’t over.” I answered: “Unfortunately, not yet. Let’s hope everything ends well.” Fabrício commented: “He left home because they dropped bombs on his house.” From another table Priscila spoke to the entire class: “Good thing he went to his family’s house.” I agreed with the children, saying, “That’s true!” (Field diary, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

In general, this experience with the children was a device through which we broadened our perceptions of knowledge, regardless of the experiences involved, we are not dealing with more or fewer experiences but with reciprocal exchanges that show diversity, respect, joy, empathy, the friendship built in everyday actions within the EMEI. These situations reveal the present moment, how children and adults alike are in the world, above all, the children’s spontaneity and their manifestations along life’s path.

## Final considerations

Starting from the children themselves we have the possibility of better understanding how to propose research and educational work with them, and how we, adults, both involved with the migratory phenomenon, can face our shortcomings and our uncertainties, above all in this moment of contemporary history that demands that we see social reality, respect life, and respect human rights. Among these are the rights of children all over the world: to migrate, to have a place to live, to interact, to play, to live childhood, to have friends, to have school, to have their languages recognized and valued, to make noise when they are together.

On the basis of the words, gestures, looks, and productions of the Bolivian and Brazilian children, and adopting a sensitive posture, this research pointed to aspects that contribute to the reflection that permeates the construction of an intercultural education with children in Early Childhood Education. The Bolivian children together with the Brazilian children, seen up close, reveal subtle yet profound particularities that affirm their relationships established in the educational space, their concerns, and their questions surrounding migratory processes.

Although she does not discuss from a childhood perspective, Bell Hooks (2000, p. 196), when dealing with affective relations, offers an important reflection: "From the moment I know my feelings, I can also know and define those needs that will only be met in communion or contact with other people."<sup>x</sup> In this sense, it is necessary to understand the friendship between Bolivian and Brazilian children as one that is open to plurality and diversity, enabling them to express themselves and to recreate themselves continually in Early Childhood settings, as in the encounters described above.

It is the opening to the other in his or her alterity, in which one is visited and returned by the other, allowing the familiar to be questioned and displaced, as well as enabling the sudden invasion of the unforeseen, of what is not yet determined among people (Baracchi, 2017). Within this relational space singularities cohabit. There may be divergences in the exposition of ideas, confrontations, but above all there can be collective constructions in which friendships have the possibility of being built.

Even if friendships are only a relational fabric of a given time, despite the captures and the freedoms that we find in them, we can still see them as the field of practices in which we constitute ourselves as persons. It is worth highlighting that children have always been responsible for the cultural integration of other children and that children have been the privileged companions of other children throughout much of human history (Rogoff, 2005).

This construction and signification of everyday actions with international migrant and Brazilian children and their families in Early Childhood settings make it possible to understand the aspects inherent to cultural exchanges. This process requires that

cultural exchanges do not occur to the detriment of one another, culminating in the loss of meaning of the experiences that exist and resist socio-culturally; on the contrary: “This practice can be a way of looking at the other, of having the opportunity to overcome our own fear of the unexpected, and of combating and eliminating any manifestations of prejudice and other forms of discrimination”<sup>xi</sup> (Pereira, 2021b, p. 962).

As Poletti (1992) emphasizes, cultural exchanges involve all the people present in pedagogical actions, for we are immersed in this perception of interconnected cultures and relations. This prompts us to adopt a broader vision, grounded in dialogue, open to new horizons, with a view to intercultural education in the creation of the curricula that underlie the educational practices of schools in basic education. As Candau (2013, p. 19) affirms, “interculturality seeks to promote dialogical and egalitarian relations between people and groups that belong to different cultural universes, working through the conflicts inherent in this reality.”<sup>xii</sup>

Within this intercultural perspective, one can infer that there is a proposal that aims to promote the interrelation among subjects who live in a similar educational space, contributing both to deconstruct the mistaken vision of cultural purity and staticity and to the recognition of identities and cultures. The participation of international migrant and Brazilian children involves reciprocal exchanges, permeated by a connection between school culture and children’s cultures, and the lack of dialogue among the school staff, students, families, and communities does not contribute to the solidity of, for example, friendships.

Therefore, situated within the educational context of Early Childhood Education, intercultural education can constitute an alternative against situations of exclusion and marginalization of cultures or of any other forms of difference and disrespect for diversity. Likewise, children’s cultures can serve as a resource in actions of welcoming and in the construction of an intercultural education, indicating possibilities for cultural exchanges and for teacher training that recognizes differences, something that also demands that we create conditions so that these differences are not transformed into inequalities.

In times of barbarity, crossed by both a political and an epidemiological pandemic that has terrorized us, and also by war and large-scale armed conflicts in Africa, Asia, and Europe, which have accumulated thousands of deaths and placed before our eyes a heap of rubble, it is urgent that we open ourselves to the possibilities that utopian energies can offer us so that we may wish for and fight for a better world and for opportunities.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> I chose to use the terms “migrations” and “migrants” because they highlight people as the protagonists of the migratory process, those who decide to migrate and who actually undertake the migratory journey.

<sup>ii</sup> This paper draws on the notion of child cultures, which occupies a central position in the debate on childhood and casts children as the protagonists of the interactions they establish among themselves and with adults, as well as of their own social, emotional, and cognitive experiences.

<sup>iii</sup> I define friendship as the act of playing together. When children play together, they share ideas, things only they know, and they construct ways of being, relating, and living. It is these configurations, these multiple intersections, that propel their friendship practices within child cultures, which at every moment acquire very particular properties, continuously produced by the children themselves.

<sup>iv</sup> Intercultural action is a practice to be built, conceived as a strategy, an action, and an ongoing process of relating and negotiating among people, under conditions of respect, legitimacy, symmetry, equity, and equality in relationships.

<sup>v</sup> Original: “*se realiza através do contato direto do pesquisador com o fenômeno observado para obter informações sobre a realidade dos atores sociais em seus próprios contextos*” (Neto, 2004, p. 59).

<sup>vi</sup> Civil-society mobilizations are composed of social entities such as non-governmental organizations, churches, and others.

<sup>vii</sup> Original: “*os usos sociais do corpo, aliados a estratégias de interação social onde se mobilizam diferenciadamente competências e conhecimentos sócio-relacionais adquiridos nas relações familiares e na comunidade e determinados recursos socioemocionais*” (Ferreira, 2004, p. 73).

<sup>viii</sup> Original: “*afirmações em que a criança responde a uma pergunta, convite ou comando prévios, feitos por outro integrante, ou justifica porque agiu, ou deixou de agir de determinada maneira*” (Sestini, 2008, p. 75).

<sup>ix</sup> Original: “*Como verdade iconográfica, não é expressão de neutralidade ou do todo ali representado. É invenção, fantasia, guarda elementos da imaginação*” (Gobbi, 2014, p. 154).

<sup>x</sup> Original: “*A partir do momento em que conheço meus sentimentos, posso também conhecer e definir aquelas necessidades que só serão preenchidas em comunhão ou contato com outras pessoas*” (Bell Hooks, 2000, p. 196).

<sup>xi</sup> Original: “*Essa prática pode ser uma forma de olharmos para o(a) outro(a), de se ter a oportunidade de superarmos o nosso próprio receio com o inesperado, e de combater e eliminar quaisquer manifestações de preconceito e outras formas de discriminação*” (Pereira, 2021b, p. 962).

<sup>xii</sup> Original: “*a interculturalidade tenta promover relações dialógicas e igualitárias entre pessoas e grupos que pertencem a universos culturais diferentes, trabalhando os conflitos inerentes a esta realidade*” (Candau, 2013, p. 19).