CADERNOS BRASILEIROS DE
TERAPIA OCUPACIONAL
BRAZILIAN JOURNAL OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

Reflection Article/Essay

Childhood, children, and pandemic: in which boat do we sail?

Infâncias, crianças e travessias: em que barcos navegamos?

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Abstract

The year 2020 has been marked by a world scenario in which the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences brought several social issues to the fore, involving social inequality, invisibility, and the silencing of a significant portion of the population, such as the breadth of its powers, especially concerning children's lives. The dialogue on the plurality of childhood and children, as well as the vulnerabilities and ways of acting in the face of Covid-19, has permeated several discussions in different disciplines, in which occupational therapy has also been learned, albeit in an initial way, but with little discussion in children's turns. In this sense and from this observation, this article presents a discussion about the place of children in the pandemic scenario, from theoretical reflections that bring to the heart of the debate issues related to the invisibility of children and their contexts that, with the current situation, became more evident. As final considerations, this text intends to favor a space for the construction of dialogue and questions about the actions of occupational therapists towards childhood and children, anchored in the Covid-19 pandemic, enabling the construction of contextualized and transformative practices and actions.

Keywords: Child, Pandemics, Covid-19, Occupational Therapy.

Resumo

O ano de 2020 foi marcado por um cenário mundial em que a pandemia da Covid-19 e suas consequências trouxeram diversas questões sociais à tona, envolvendo a desigualdade social, a invisibilidade e o silenciamento de parcela significativa da população, tal como a amplitude de suas potências, principalmente no que tange à vida das crianças. O diálogo sobre a pluralidade das infâncias e das crianças, bem como das vulnerabilidades e dos modos de agir frente à Covid-19, tem permeado diversas discussões em disciplinas diversas, nas quais a terapia ocupacional também tem se inteirado, ainda que de maneira inicial, mas com pouca discussão em torno das crianças. Neste sentido e a partir desta constatação, este artigo apresenta uma discussão sobre o lugar das crianças no cenário da pandemia, com base em reflexões teóricas que trazem para o cerne do debate questões relacionadas à invisibilidade das crianças e seus

contextos, as quais, com a situação atual, tornaram-se mais evidentes. Enquanto considerações finais, este texto pretende favorecer um espaço de construção de diálogo e de indagações sobre as ações dos terapeutas ocupacionais frente às infâncias e crianças, ancorado na pandemia de Covid-19, possibilitando a construção de práticas e ações contextualizadas e transformadoras.

Palavras-chave: Criança, Pandemias, Covid-19, Terapia Ocupacional.

Introduction

> And zones of invisibility could multiply in many other regions of the world, and perhaps even here, very close to each one of us. Maybe just open the window
> (Santos, 2020, p. 8-9).

The current situation of the pandemic caused by the coronavirus, or Covid-19, as an existing social reality, brings important notions for the debate, such as the conceptions of concepts and norms aimed at the terms of common and exception, normality, health-disease, of the truth and the selective obvious. This selective term is based on an understanding that there is a cutoff of class, race, gender, and generation, from which children are, for the most part, not considered. Much has been placed as the return of children in the post-pandemic, mainly themes related to school issues and situations to come, while little is considered about children as individuals of this present time, in which the pandemic takes place – they are not imaginary individuals but real individuals that constitute themselves and are constituted based on social relations based on today's times, with their limitations and lack of access, powers, and creations.

This article aims to reflect on the theme of childhood and children at the time of a pandemic, considering not only physical distances but the socioeconomic and cultural abysses that children live, reinforced by the feeling and experience of isolation and feeling of restrictions diverse. The intention is to enable a discussion about how childhoods and children have been treated, thought, researched, discussed, and worked on, creating breaks in pre-established concepts and openings for adverse situations, emphatically during the pandemic, in interface areas, and also in occupational therapy. It is questioned whether the resolutions put forward, based on the demands arising from the current pandemic scenario, analyze how children have been perceived, or whether we maintain a discourse of exclusion and annihilation of differences, diversities, and pluralities, and, consequently, of the diverse possibilities of childhoods.

With a total population of 210,147,1254 people, according to IBGE projection and in line with data from the Observatório da Criança e do Adolescente[1] for 2019 (Fundação ABRINQ, 2019), Brazil is a country with 65,600,982 million children, in other words, almost 1/3 of the Brazilian population is made up of children and adolescents from zero to 18 years old. Of this total, the estimation is that more than 55 million children live in urban areas, while the rest live in rural areas, mainly from the north and northeast regions of the country.

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[1] Link of access: https://observatoriocrianca.org.br/cenario-infancia

As for the situation of vulnerability, the Child and Adolescent Observatory (Observatório da Criança e do Adolescente[2]) show us that the proportion of children under 14 years old identified as belonging to the lower-income classes is 45.4%, that is, 18,790,798 children. More specific data, which name the situations called as unequal, although they indicate, in general, Brazil as the 7th most unequal country in the world (Programa das Nações Unidas para o Desenvolvimento, 2017), were not found, which suggests a gap regarding the qualification of data and clippings of the total percentage of children who live in the lowest social classes or even the most peripheral places, and the total number of children who live in situations of different vulnerability.

In general, the constitution of these data shows us that Brazil is a country with a high number of children, constituting a young population, especially those living in the lower economic classes, in distinct urban and rural areas, emphatically in the Brazilian northeast region. Thinking about policies and programs for children in the country, one of the main points refers to school issues, emphatically to daycare centers and schools, understood as a duty of the State, in the mandatory educational supply and demand, as the school as a right of children and family members.

Considering the school as one of the main places aimed at the interests of children and their families, the data of children enrolled in daycare centers in Brazil, in 2019, up to 3 years old was 3,483,230 million; between 4 and 5 years old it was 4,744,889 million; children enrolled in Elementary School amounted to 26,923,730 million; in high school, a concise number of enrollments (from 15 to 17 years old) was not found.

This data is relevant here because, based on the understanding that the school is the place of childhood (the place where children are), today we have a total of more than 60 million children without classes due to the Covid 19 virus and restrictive measures. However, the number of children out of school was already quite high before the pandemic (a total of 30 million children are estimated here, considering the number of children enrolled), which makes us think that dropout schooling or lack of access to schools is a pre-pandemic data. Likewise, the lack or insufficiency of data or other indicators of the child's quality of life and access to rights, implying a distance between the child's life, school life, and social rights, are also prior and, with the current scenario of Covid-19, seem to bring to light an old debate: which children are we talking about and for which children have we thought about actions, programs, and research?

Over the years, national and international researchers on childhood studies have sought to give visibility to children and childhood in a social and cultural sphere. They refute many of the universalizing views that encompass ways of acting and thinking policies with children, based on biological views and/or developmentalism who have conceived them over the decades, in which the polarizations are between a "normal" or "atypical" childhood. That is a unique conception of childhood and of children that fit or do not fit within this segment (Pastore, 2020). The ruptures and continuities brought about and wide open by the pandemic situation have made this debate possible, raising questions about childhoods and their diversities, especially inequalities. Is the virus bringing ways to rethink childhoods and, consequently, children?

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[2] The data brought up refer to children who live in families with an income of up to ¼ or ½ the minimum wage. According to the portal, this number indicates "the proportion and quantity of the total population identified in the per capita monthly household income classes of up to half and up to a quarter of the minimum wage" (2020), of which the Northeast is, again, the region with the highest inequality index.

Talking about childhoods and children also in occupational therapy is to be in constant dialogue with their histories, contexts, cultures, socioeconomic, racial, gender, and generational issues. With the vulnerabilities stamped by Covid-19, the question remains: which children has occupational therapy worked with and which childhoods has it been thinking about?

In this sense, this text is composed of a reflection on the situation of children, the pandemic and its consequences, expanding a debate on ethnic, cultural, racial, gender, economic, socio-historical diversities, among many other existing possibilities between childhoods and their contexts in dialogue with/in/for occupational therapy. To think of public policies directed to the current moment is to consider children in their surroundings and realities, in present and future times, with the occupational therapist being one of the professionals capable of mediating relationships within the scope of social policies aimed at children and childhood.

Methodology

Being an article designed and produced in the latent moment of the pandemic (May 2020), the bibliographical references on the topic were still incipient. At the national level, we sought to survey lectures, courses, speeches, and publications, all online, which addressed the issues of children and the pandemic, mainly in the areas of education and human sciences. In the health area, we highlight productions by Fiocruz such as "Covid 19 and the health of children and adolescents" and "Covid-19 observatory". In occupational therapy, we found a few documents, mainly valuing the manuals produced by InformaSUS, the digital platform of the Federal University of São Carlos, in favor of social communication in the context of covid-19.

Based on a brief bibliographic survey carried out with the descriptors "children" and "pandemic", we also found few articles or publications. In the Scielo database, for example, we found 17 articles in which the focus of publications varied between family routines and children's activities, emphatically with children with autism, or the health of children and adolescents, or on situations of violence. In Lilacs database, in 223 articles, most focused on the pandemic and Covid-19 infection, not necessarily on children; a few addressed issues related to public policies and children's rights, thinking mainly about the post-pandemic moment.

The search showed that children are still under-reported in productions aimed at Covid-19 and that new ways of seeking references at this time are essential, especially on digital platforms and social networks, as in the case of courses, webinars (online seminars), lives (lectures or conversation circles held on digital platforms or social networks such as Instagram or Facebook), among others.

As a reflection text, this article aims to support the debate and discussions about children, childhoods, and the pandemic, making us question our role as thinkers, critics, professionals, researchers, and scholars of childhoods and children at the moment, and our relationship and involvement with the formulation of social policies that think children, and that is aimed at them and their pluralities.

Childhood and pandemic: Is there a place for children?

With the onset of the pandemic and the actions and measures taken, children have been placed within the population's health and care protocols, in which isolation becomes

paramount, especially with the absence of physical classes. Considering the specifics of children, the question is whether we could say that such restrictive protocols and measures have considered children as active, participating, and participative subjects, of rights and policies within these measures: what has been thought for children and their development? Which children have we been looking at? Which children are we talking about? What protocols do we follow?

Many discussions and events have been thought about different themes, such as gender, sexuality, racism, whiteness, mental illness, extermination and necropolitics, confinement, solitude, economic and political issues, among others. However, even though children are also permeated by all these issues, they are generally placed as external to them. We think about world transformations, but we do not consider children within the countless possibilities, nor as interlocutors of the dialogues mentioned above. With or without a pandemic, children seem to have no place in the scene of everyday life, unless they become a problem.

Childhood starts to be questioned and discussed in several seminars, topics of lectures, and online debates, mainly in positions related to education, almost like the threat of a system in which the human is placed at stake, in dispute, within of a political and economic framework (Arroyo, 2020). But childhood, as a socially constructed category, with its questions and formulations outlined above, and which constitutes the age and social category in which children are part, remains denied, buried, and without evident place.

Arroyo (2020) provokes us when he says that

> when oppression is the rule, questions are needed. [...] In times of questioning, let us question. What lives are being threatened? Why don't we work on this human relationship between education and life? Because we work neither in education nor for life (Arroyo, 2020, s/p).

By understanding education and using it as a metaphor for practices with children, which transcends the "child's place" and thinks about movements and contexts, we understand the child, in his education, based on demands and realities, enabling ways of being in the world from real times and from the here and now. Children as subjects of this time, in which the pandemic takes place are not imaginary subjects, but real subjects that are constituted based on social relations based on today's times. Children are considered citizens of the future, but who, in the present, seems to be distant or far from the so-called common or collective spaces of life in society (Sarmento et al., 2007; Pereira, 2013).

If there was a school before for a significant part of these children, where are the children now that classes have been suspended? We are naive and perhaps even perverse, to think that they are at home and that this period has been lived equality for all children. What children are at home? What house are we talking about?

In our speeches, actions, and research with children, during the pandemic, have we considered selective confinement? Or, the situation of the houses that the children live in? How are children in quarantine geography, thinking of a peripheral architecture that marks these childhoods, or are they marked by these childhoods? Or, still, what about the children who are on the streets? Is there a place for these children within the confinements (Amore, 2020)?

Given the current scenario, childhoods seem confined in spaces that, similarly, do not seem to allow their existence, and children, with their bodies that do not fit into protocols.

When we think about confinement, they are not just confined bodies, but they are imprisonment of experiences, essences, relationships, touch, exchanges, emotions, feelings, experiments (Ghirardi, 2011; Nascimento, 2020).

In the history of occupational therapy, we have actions and research that have mostly turned to developmental practices and normality or pathologies, without resorting, in most studies, to sociocultural approaches. In times of pandemic, actions have been designed in terms of care, mainly seeking booklets and manuals on how to perform a certain procedure, as well as ways of playing and games to be done in certain environments, in which the target audience is parents and family members, which are the people involved in the process of playing and teaching games, and not the children directly (Barba, 2020).

Some game manuals have been produced, mainly in occupational therapy, thinking of activities for children's routines and parents' involvement in this relationship. Almost like guides aimed at family activities, these manuals have circulated as a possibility of entertainment for children, thinking of playing as their main occupation. Based on this scenario, we also have some questions: which children have parents "available" to play with them? Which parents access the proposed documents? One of the documents used as a guide for parents, in times of play and pandemics and to promote the child's health, is entitled "How to survive the quarantine with children at home?", by the Equipe Pé no Chão (2020). The title of the e-book reinforces, in my view, the stigma of the problem child beyond the pandemic, as well as the occupational therapist as a professional who directs activities to the general public, without dialogue with other specificities of children and even their environments. We must ask ourselves if children can practice yoga or listen to their favorite music, or if children know what this is or if they access such structures.

In a pandemic playbook[3] of things to do during the pandemic, which children are being considered? Are the actions for children (some of them) limited to manuals, such as protocols? The issues raised here are not about the content of the material or about discussing whether the activities are good or not. The point is to think about which children access these materials, who can print, read and understand booklets, or even access the internet and audio and video devices, and how we have understood this moment of pandemic also for children: does give more activities to fill in idle spaces or gaps, mean thinking about the child during the pandemic?

Since 2010, the World Federation of Occupational Therapists – WFOT has reinforced the need to respect values, beliefs, and cultural diversity, in line with social, psychological, biological, economic, political, and spiritual aspects of each individual and their social participation, to which children should be connected and considered. The pandemic seems to provoke, as a challenge, the organization and ways of thinking about actions and research that emphasize the performance in these different cultural contexts and propose strategies for work with children. They are based on their realities, also considering the moments in which confinement becomes present. It is urgent to rethink how we have problematized situations and how children and childhoods have appeared, questioned, and reinvented.

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[3]Some examples can be accessed from these links: https://www.yumpu.com/pt/document/read/62571466/cartilha-brincar ; https://www.fmcsv.org.br/pt-BR/guia-atividades-familias-criancas-0-6-anos/#criancas-ate-3anos ; https://mcusercontent.com/43b7fb606a7e4daeb736694ef/files/cf9421cc-0c27-4ec6-be31-bb76f83ccfb0/RotinaQuarentena_3_.pdf ; http://www.institutosantosdumont.org.br/2020/05/19/covid-19-e-autismo-cartilha-traz-brincadeiras-e-dicas-para-quarentena/

As observed by Barros (2004, p. 95), "in action it is necessary for the technician to know how to resize his knowledge, to know how to move through reactions of social and cultural alterities". It is urgent and necessary that the co-habitation of different identities becomes a reading of possible worlds, in which occupational therapists have the skills and abilities to work with the problems that arise in societies and in demands marked by inequalities, in which children coexist together with the multiplicity of childhoods (Barros et al., 2007; Pastore, 2020).

This is the time to question, more than ever, childhood and the universalizing ways we have been dealing with children and with practices in/of occupational therapy with/for/about childhood since before the pandemic and ask: "what is the practice we are doing and which world project do we want to pursue?". Thinking about the invisibility of childhoods and the denial of space for different children becomes essential.

Social vulnerabilities, diversities, and pandemic: dialogues between occupational therapy and childhood

At a table on "subjugated groups and the vulnerability of childhood in cities"[4], Caio Santo Amore, professor at the Architecture and Urbanism Graduation at the University of São Paulo – USP, reflects on the conditions of violence, housing, and violations that have permeated the constitution of the city from previous periods, or "since Brazil was invented" (Amore, 2020). He reflects that it took a pandemic to make us look at this. With a conception of capitalist society, the conditions of survival of populations and how life has been organized, over the years, points to segregation and violations of rights that have shaped bodies and their exterminations, from which children have been shaped within these configurations, just like the scenario that constitutes their contexts.

When we think about seclusion in domestic spaces and the spatiality that was formed, or reinforced, where there is a mix between public and private (Cohn, 2020), in which children's lives are also permeated by these events and raise as questions the reconfiguration of the fields of study and the times of the here and now, there is a need to broaden discussions about care, rights, vulnerabilities and other variables in which children should be questioned as social subjects and participants in their daily lives, in the changes imposed and although they have not been placed as a risk group in this pandemic, their rights, especially mobility and participation have been denied (Muller, 2020; Ribeiro, 2020).

Costa (2020) recalls that "in addition to all this, we cannot forget that children have ways of understanding and communicating feelings and regrets that are different from those of adults. It is important to think specific care strategies for them". Cohn (2020) and Ribeiro (2020) point to a debate about the plurality of childhoods and the conditions imposed by the pandemic, in which confinement, like illness, does not affect children equally: there is a social differentiation of children, which mark the pluralities of childhood experiences, and which resonates with the possibilities of the constitution and of experiencing the daily periods and which, in a dialogue with Costa, raises questions for occupational therapy about how we have worked the understanding of children and childhoods in the course, especially in the actions developed at this time of the pandemic.

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[4] Childhood course in time of pandemic. Federal University of ABC. Access link: http://cursos.ufabc.edu.br/digitalplural/inovacao-social-no-combate-a-pandemia-de-covid-19/cursos/infancias-na-pandemia/

If we produce space and it produces us (Leitão, 2020), in times of confinement and inequalities, how have spaces for children been produced? In occupational therapy, we have developed actions in different environments: in hospitals, as is the case brought up by Silva et al. (2020) and work in the neonatal ICU, pediatric ward, and telemonitoring; Sued (2020) discusses the importance of playing in Covid-19 times, especially in a hospital in the trans-Amazon region; Ferigato (2020), within an interdepartmental and interdisciplinary project, addresses care in mental health actions with children and adolescents; Barba (2020) reinforces the importance of playing in times of pandemic; LaFollia Laboratory of UFSCar made available booklets with information on care for autistic patients in the face of the pandemic (Agência FAPESP, 2020). One of the similar points, within the actions, concerns the care and assistance of children from care institutions and a health perspective. How to aggregate the multiple vulnerabilities and diversities that the pandemic has brought with children who are not in services?

The documents produced by Fio Cruz – Rio de Janeiro (Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, 2020) list issues related to the health of children and adolescents at the time of the pandemic, but still generally, without specifying the groups with whom one dialogue and how health issues and social inequalities are thought in a multiethnic country like Brazil; nor does it distinguish between sociocultural or societal variants, making pluralities and differences invisible, once again.

By a plurality of childhoods, we can list some groups of children: the orphaned children of Covid-19's lethal cases; indigenous children; the *quilombola* children; Gypsy children; immigrant children; street children; children victims of domestic violence; children in MST camps; children in life, in different situations, and all possible contexts (Miranda, 2020). How to think about the "epidemiological vulnerability of children with the incidence of Covid-19 for the child population" without considering all these issues (Cohn, 2020)?

Farias & Leite (2021, p. 3) bring to the debate that "social injustices are an ethical issue in contemporary society, as the desire to resolve them is a political option, given that resources are available". Santos (2020), in his text on "the cruel pedagogy of the virus", raises the vulnerable groups directly affected by Covid-19, and points out, within these groups, women, informal workers, street workers, those without shelter (or on the streets), residents of the suburbs, immigrants and refugees (in different situations), the disabled and, finally, the elderly population. He ends up leaving out, again, the children, who do not appear in any of the groups mentioned, except for women, when they are placed as mothers and the work overload. If we think that the conditions for change are political, thinking about children and the position they have taken or occupied during this pandemic (and, I repeat, not only) is also a political act.

Talking about social vulnerabilities, at this moment, is talking about the diversity and plurality of childhoods in which children are subjects that cohabit spaces, the implications found in different places and their structures, by local realities and by global processes (Imoh, 2016). What notions of vulnerabilities have the pandemic made us work and to whom have we directed our practices, looks, and research? Are children, once again, cut off from these scenarios, or have they been suffocated by silencing and invisibilities?

As occupational therapists, it is up to us to perceive the vulnerabilities and weaknesses, as well as the different childhoods, and to understand how Covid-19 is experienced by different children, reviewing the place of research, practice, and care.

> It remains urgent and necessary to think and rethink how children and their realities, understood from specific contexts, need to integrate different practices, understanding the action of children and the community as fundamental in the process and that local, cultural, and social knowledge must integrate the framework of policies, studies, and research in the scope of childhood and social issues (Pastore, 2020, p. 140).

Expanding a discussion, at this moment, and seeking the plurality and diversity of childhoods, their contexts and existing vulnerabilities are fundamental factors to think of ways to make childhoods and children visible and in practices that mobilize to be real, thus, transformative, establishing a dialogue in which there is a dialogical relationship, discovering dimensions and possibilities of reality, in which technical issues are also produced and producers of stories and cultures (Barros, 2004).

The therapeutic project, or the project of life, research, and actions, must have life. Embracing diversities is the only possibility of transforming, in which "making life possible is not denying reality, but, based on the given reality, doing something else with it" (Thebas, 2020).

Childhood pluralities and children's diversity: intermittent dialogues beyond the pandemic

The current situations and how practices and researches have been thought at the time of Covid-19 have also been the stage for positions and directions from the World Federation of Occupational Therapy – World Federation of Occupational Therapy (2020), globally, and the Brazilian Association of Occupational Therapists (Associação Brasileira de Terapeutas Ocupacionais, 2020), nationwide, understanding the role of the occupational therapist in facing the inequalities and vulnerabilities to which the virus has exposed us. Boaventura de Sousa Santos also points out that it is time to look at the current issues and seek alternatives on how to get out of them, by understanding and calling us to the necessary changes in paradigms, scenarios, and ways of facing the practices and research that have been produced.

Thinking about children and childhood is thinking about cities, structures, how confinements have been made, or not, and to whom protocols and manuals have been directed. There is no way to think about childhoods without the children who permeate, inhabit, transform, and are transformed. Did we modify the reading of the world or expand the magnifying glasses that we looked at certain social segments?

Children, as subjects of rights, active and participatory, have not been considered within the discourses and modus operandi. The sensations, the emotions, the fears, the restrictions... Little has been looked at or talked to children about these issues. Producing materials, discussions, themes, projects, and policies that do not take children into account and do not place them at the heart of debates is to continue in an excluding logic, in which changes in paradigms, concepts, and practices remain distant. Thinking about these issues becomes urgent and necessary not only in what we have called "post-pandemic" but in times of now. Discussing and understanding children and childhoods in their pluralities and diversities are ways of mediating the infinite possibilities of existence and resistance that permeate children's worlds.

At this point, we have to rethink the "normal", the practical doings and research that we have directed, or segregated, from children and childhood, as well as the definitions and notions we have used as occupational therapists and in the role of care we have destined. We need to review the silence we carry when we deny diversities and differences, understanding this silence as a producer of misery. There is an opportunity to make now a political act, one of changes and transformations.

The pandemic has given important reflexive questions to us, including which "boat" we navigate, as a metaphor for the paths we follow. The truth is, we are not in the same boat and we have never been in the same boat, and the question that needs to be asked is, in which boat will we get out of this?

> For every crossing, there is always a moment when you are not on one side or the other, where you are neither what you were nor what you will be; for once they are discriminated against, the contiguous never reaches them. One remains in suspension – eternally hovering in-between (Crapanzano, 2005, p. 378).

With a plural and so unequal Brazil, perhaps it is time, in occupational therapy and beyond, to work childhoods as crossings, in which the suggestion is to look at the studies, practices, contexts, theories, knowledge, and practices about these universes that they lead from one place to another, opening the way for other paths to be followed, in which children and childhood are no longer made invisible, but constituents, transforming and possible.

Acknowledgments

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