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Childhood and Pandemic: feelings and utopias of children

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ABSTRACT – Childhood and Pandemic: feelings and utopias of children. What do children say about this broad social and cultural world affected by covid-19? What feelings and utopias have children from Rio de Janeiro experienced? These are questions that guided our research, carried out in 2021, when we interviewed 73 children, between 4 and 12 years old, living in the state capital and metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro. The research involved five groups, linked to two public universities in the region, and we opted for the familiarity network technique in order to reach the children. The results indicate that the children operated their feelings in the present time, as a way of understanding reality and imagining futures to nurture utopia while recording what substantiates all that has already been lived.
Keywords: **Childhood. Children. Pandemic. Rio de Janeiro.**

RESUMO – Infância e Pandemia: sentimentos e utopias de crianças. O que contam as crianças desse amplo mundo social e cultural acometido pela covid-19? Que sentimentos e utopias crianças fluminense vivenciaram? São perguntas que orientaram nossa pesquisa, realizada no ano de 2021, quando entrevistamos 73 crianças, de 4 a 12 anos, moradoras da capital e Região Metropolitana do Rio de Janeiro. A pesquisa envolveu 5 grupos de pesquisa, vinculados a duas universidades públicas da região, e optamos pela técnica de rede de familiaridade para chegar até as crianças. Os resultados indicam que as crianças operaram seus sentimentos no tempo presente, como uma forma de compreender a realidade e de imaginar futuros para fertilizar a utopia enquanto se registra o que substancia o já vivido.
Palavras-chave: **Infância. Crianças. Pandemia. Rio de Janeiro.**

Introductory notes

> Childhood task: integrating the new world into symbolic space. The child is able to do something that the adult cannot: remember the new. For us, locomotives have a symbolic character, since we encountered them in our childhood. Our children, in turn, will perceive the symbolic character of automobiles, of which we only made the most of the new, elegant, modern, daring side. Each childhood discovers these new images to incorporate them into the image heritage of humanity (Benjamin, 2009, p. 435).

This childhood task, pointed out by Benjamin, shows that children live the present time with total intensity and completeness, they are contemporary, they have the ability to remember and (re)signify that which is new. They express their impressions about what they live and feel in a unique way. They bring in their bodies and speech the symbolic character of their perceptions, giving visibility to what we can only appreciate. The generational character of childhood is depicted in this movement, recalling what is genuinely new to it at the time it witnesses it. What do children say about this broad social and cultural world that is offered to them?

Our objective in undertaking our study entitled "Childhood and pandemic: feelings and utopias of children in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro" was to listen to children's accounts of what they experienced in the context of the health and economic crisis caused by the covid-19[1] pandemic. Gaining knowledge of what only they can say about the enunciative place they occupy requires the researcher to be open and sensitive to listening and to an unfolding of perspectives, in an attempt to see what they see, to seek to interpret and analyze their unique expressions and the answers they give in the quest to understand what is around them. That present time was marked by covid-19, experienced with effect from the year 2020, and which had impacts on all public and private spheres of the world. The pandemic greatly affected the lives of all people, with deaths, isolation, travel restrictions, changes in the dynamics of socio-political life, loss of jobs and income, an increase in cases of physical, sexual and psychological violence, an increase in neuropsychic illnesses and other problems.

In the midst of this whirlwind of changes and restrictions, in 2021 we were invited by the *Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisas sobre Educação Infantil e Infância* – NEPEI (Center for Studies and Research on Early Childhood Education), linked to the *Faculdade de Educação* – FaE (Faculty of Education) of the *Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais* – UFMG (Federal University of Minas Gerais), to replicate the research they developed, namely, *Childhood in times of pandemic: experiences of children in Greater Belo Horizonte* (Silva; Luz; Carvalho, 2021; Silva; Luz; Carvalho; Gouvêa, 2022). Based on this invitation, we – university teachers at the Faculties of Education of the *Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro* – UERJ (State University of Rio de Janeiro) (UERJ) and at the *Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro* – UFRJ[2] (Federal University of Rio

de Janeiro) – also considered it relevant to talk to children in the state capital and the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro to find out about their daily lives and their social relationships in these times of health crisis. We prioritized our attention on their feelings and utopias, their perceptions and experiences, with the main objective of understanding how they experienced the context of the pandemic.

A thesis shared by the Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro research teams refers to the urgency and pressing need to listen to children insofar as they participate in the daily production of social reality and produce their interpretations of what they have experienced. However, despite the challenges of creating plausible instruments in the context of the pandemic, Gouveia (2022) points out that such listening is still timid and pulverized in the research on the covid-19 pandemic, considering that children make up about ¼ of the world population. The author states that many studies seek to gain knowledge about children, but seek information from adults, usually their mothers, without dialoguing with the children themselves, which reveals the social, cultural and political place occupied by them in society, in the global experience of the pandemic and in the production of narratives about this experience.

In Brazil, the first covid-19 case was confirmed on February 26, 2020 (Brasil, 2020a). On March 13, the Government of the State of Rio de Janeiro issued Decree No. 46966 (Rio de Janeiro, 2020c), providing for "[…] measures to address the public health emergency of international concern resulting from coronavirus[3]". At that time, there were already 98 cases of coronavirus infection in Brazil, 16 of them in the state of Rio de Janeiro. For this reason, State Decree No. 46970 (Rio de Janeiro, 2020d), established social distancing quarantine measures initially planned to last 15 days – which would later be extended –, suspending school classes and events in order to avoid crowds and contagion. It is worth noting that the singularity of the spread of the pandemic in the different regions of the country, associated with a denialist stance by the Federal Administration, led to decision-making at the state level regarding the establishment of policies to address the pandemic, which reinforces the importance of research in Brazil's states as a possibility of composing a national panorama of this conjuncture.

The first cases of illness and death were registered in adults, initially leaving children invisible and supposedly protected, a situation that would change with the knowledge of the possibility of infection without symptoms. Children then began to be seen as dangerous, as they could expose their older family members, the group most affected when community transmission[4] began. The vaccine for children, which came much later than the vaccine for adults, as well as the controversial government policy for childhood vaccination, also contributed to position them politically in the context of the pandemic.

Without covering all childhood ages, Levy (2022) states that covid-19 killed two children under 5 years of age per day in Brazil. In the state of Rio de Janeiro, according to the covid-19 Panel[5], between 2020

and 2022[6], 123,988 confirmed cases of infection were recorded in children aged between 0 and 12 years, 190 of whom died. The Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro is today made up of 22 municipalities, accounting for about 75% of the state's estimated population, that is, 13,195,999 of the state's 17,463,349 inhabitants, and concentrates the largest child population (IBGE, 2021). The covid-19 Panel indicates that between 2020 and 2022, the Metropolitan Region had 79,190 confirmed cases among children aged 0 to 12 years old, 134 of whom died.

The priority socially assigned to children and legally established[7] lost force with the pandemic, justified by the "low" mortality rates. In contrast, the suspension of classes, taken as a measure to face the health crisis, put children back in the debate about the pandemic, taking on once more, as students, a certain priority in social concerns: learning, socialization processes, conditions of access to technologies, the remote teaching model or returning to school, daily and family adjustments to deal with the "absent-presence" of school.

Sharing an unusual horizontality with adults in the face of lack of knowledge about the pandemic, children actively participate in society, sharing anxieties, experiencing feelings, affected by contours of social class, race, gender and territory that the pandemic has reinforced. To what extent do they find someone to listen to them to express their feelings, share desires, interpretations and search for comfort? The complexity of these experiences both justifies and imposes on childhood researchers the ethical duty of listening to children, taken as an expression of the uniqueness of their being and also as the production of knowledge with an age and generational focus. Our listening was about feelings and utopias.

Bakhtin (1998), Benjamin (1987; 2009), and Williams (1979) indicate that, historically, characterizing lived experiences is not particularly difficult. For example, here we delimit a geographic region, a time frame and a specific group. The challenge, for these authors, is to perceive/record/communicate ways of understanding historical time by subjects in the act of living experiences. It has been said that there is a certain historiographical negligence with the fluidity of everyday life and its modes of apprehension, which is due to an overvaluation of materiality and aspects that are allowed to be fixed and generalized, to the detriment of what is shown to be immaterial, singular and fluid, such as present time, waiting to be named.

Time, lived in different ways – *chronos, kairós, ayón* – does not occur outside a social, territorial, political context and, in this sense, the idea of thinking time as the fourth dimension of space – as the Russian philosopher Bakhtin does, when analyzing literary texts and which he called chronotope – helps us to think about the pandemic with children. For Bakhtin (1998, p. 211): "The indices of time appear in space, and space takes on meaning and is measured with – time. This crossing of series and the fusion of signs characterize the artistic chronotope". By analogy, we can refer to the pandemic chronotope(s) experienced by the children in this research. But, as Amorim states (2006, p. 105), the

concept of chronotope "[…] refers to a production of history. It designates a collective place, a kind of space-time matrix from where several stories are told or written". Therefore, the chronotope is permeated by questions of the collective subject. It is in the tension between singularity and the social/collective dimension that feelings and utopias become the focus of our attention.

Etymologically, the word sentiment (feeling) comes from the Latin verb *sentire* and also refers to *sentimentum*, *sentiens*, *sentio*, *sensi*, *sensus*. It has a polysemic meaning that encompasses: feeling, knowing, experimenting, conjecturing, having a sense, sense, sensitivity (Cunha, 2010), as well as discerning, noticing, thinking, judging, imagining, supposing, deciding, giving an opinion (Rezende; Bianchet, 2014). It is open both to what is allowed to be fixed in concepts, as well as to what escapes us, but which proves to be decisive in forms of apprehension. The advent of modernity and the criteria of truth adopted by modern science have led to a rupture between these different meanings and their intersections in the production of knowledge, dividing and hierarchizing science and art, reason and sensibility, social and individual. In this perspective, which is still hegemonic, feelings, treated as individual and transitory passions, difficult to generalize, are emptied of their relevance and deprived of a social character in the production of knowledge.

Bakhtin, Benjamin, and Williams converge as to questioning about the ethical and political consequences that can be drawn from this split and as to the affirmation of the urgency of formulating other epistemologies. They affirm the necessary dialogue between the different fields of human culture, especially between the arts and human sciences. They consider that the arts, as a rule, precede the sciences in the apprehension of social reality, but the sciences, in turn, having the question as an instituting substance, can address in other ways that which art establishes or communicates, expanding its meanings and points of view. This is the understanding of Williams (1979), who, based on the idea of feeling, coined the concept of structure of feeling/structure of meaning – as if in parallel with the concept of worldview or ideology –, fundamental for perceiving in cultural productions, especially in the arts, historical or generational marks that are shown through their happening, recurrent traits of an era. Aspects that will become material, but that in the procedural present of their construction, reveal an epochal feeling.

Data and facts, taken only in their rationality, alienate themselves from their condition of production of social reality. How are perception, emotion, understanding effected? In what ways are they socialized? For Williams (1979) feelings make up the structure of ways of knowing, they are not just immaterial variables of the present that fade away as knowledge is produced. They are decisive in justifying the finalized forms of concepts. Hence the importance of considering the processes, as the present happens, and not only what is fixed as a product and distances itself from us to the point of our not recognizing it.

This is the theme that led us to focus on the feelings associated with the idea of utopia, a political decision that is justified as a counterpoint to the dystopian narratives that have permeated the experience of the pandemic and the actions of a denialist government. In contrast to dystopia – an anti-utopian place, of deprivation, oppression and denial of social imagery –, we take the concept of utopia in the sense of Leandro Konder (Bazílio; Ribes; Jobim; Souza, 2001), associated with the ability to read the present in the set of reviews of the past and projections for the future. Utopia is a grasp of awareness of social reality as a human production: reality is not given, but rather is mutable, transformable, it can be different.

The germ of this idea was already present in the novel *Utopia*, by Thomas More (2020), written in 1516, popularizing the Greek expression in its etymology of non-place, nowhere or place that does not exist. It is worth remembering that More adhered, among other Renaissance characters, to the tradition of a group of humanist thinkers who, with roguery, offered a counterpoint to the rigid dictates of the then emerging modern science.

Utopia is a work about an imaginary country, a supposed non-place that, curiously, is narrated in detail. But, as an idealized place, it is the opposite of the conjuncture experienced by its author, the chancellor of Henry VIII, bothered by being an adviser to a monarch who does not allow himself to be advised. He adopts literature as a place of social criticism and resorts to antinomies as an exercise in roguery: *Ademos* (ruler) means "prince without people", *Anhydria* (the river that forms the borders of *Utopia*) means "without water" and the narrator's name, *Hitlodeu*, means "merchant of improprieties". As can be seen, negation in u-topos is more of a game than a thesis. That is why in *Utopia* private property is abolished, there is plenty and everyone works equally.

Perhaps it was necessary to wait for five hundred years since this work was published to formulate, together with Krenak (2019), astonishment by the fact that it is easier for us to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the building of another world structured under parameters of social justice. Long years of capitalism and colonization consolidated the concept of utopia more as a non-place than as the possibility of a place to idealize – idealization understood here as imagination. In addition to an epistemology, what Krenak signals is the urgency of a cosmological existence that enables the extraction of the ethical consequences of capitalist exploitation of nature that, to a certain extent, is the basis of the imbalance from which pandemics emerge.

Methods

The pandemic has put on the agenda the acuteness of the present time and the emergence of imagining other shared futures under the attentive and meticulous eyes of children. That is why we wanted to listen to children to find out how they perceived and experienced the context of the pandemic, what impacts this situation had and/or has on their

lives, what feelings they were able to express in relation to this moment of health crisis – and, above all, what expectations they have of society and the world. More specifically, we aimed to get to know children's routines, their social relationships as children, analyze their ways of understanding the present, examine their emotions and feelings from their accounts and how they see the present and future of the world in which they live.

The research was mainly an investigation of a qualitative nature – although we have also tabulated information in a quantitative way. More specifically, we aimed to: a) compare the interpretative analysis, focusing on the children's spoken, corporal and pictorial language; b) articulate the binomial protection and participation as we requested the children's participation and paid attention to what they told us; c) give visibility to the aesthetic, poetic and political dimension, made explicit in their languages and in their position as co-builders of society; d) capture children's perceptions of the world they inhabit – from issues that concern them directly, such as school, peer groups and family, but also those that we do not connect to childhood – economics, urban planning, health issues, etc.; e) apprehend what expectations they have regarding the future of society, not within the perspective that puts childhood in a prospective dimension, but rather one that understands children as social agents and, as such, who are also responsible for building the world; f) seek to understand what subjective changes children perceive in themselves resulting from the pandemic context, how they see the social problems that affect us and how they can be involved as participants in building a fairer and more egalitarian life.

With these objectives, based on the field of childhood studies, we organized our research around three axes: 1) experiences, perceptions, emotions and feelings: based on their routines and social relationships, within the family, school, religion and social media, we sought to understand their ideas, perceptions, concerns, concerns, hopes and/or fears in relation to the world in which they live; 2) sociographic contexts and profiles: based on the children's self-reported accounts, we recorded their ages, gender, ethnic-racial and generational identification; we tried to find out who the members of their families were, where they lived and how many people they lived with; we asked about the modality and type of school they attended; and places of coexistence (neighborhood, church, city facilities, etc.); and, finally, 3) languages and expressions: we collected spoken records and some drawings, which provide dimension and helped in the dissemination of their realities and in the building of narratives on the themes evoked by the research.

The research was carried out with children from the state of Rio de Janeiro, living in both the state capital and cities that make up the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro. Between August and December 2021[8], 73 children aged between 4 and 12 years old were interviewed – this being age limit defining children in accordance with the criteria established by the Brazilian Child and Adolescent Statute (Brasil, 1990b).

The research team was made up of undergraduate and postgraduate students and researchers from the study groups and research groups of the university teachers who coordinated the project[9]. This choice criterion was based on the understanding that it would be important for the team to have some training in the field of education and some experience in dialoguing and dealing with children. Therefore, a total of 58 researchers made up the team.

Although children were our main interlocutors, we were aware of the need for authorization and mediation from those responsible for them, who also participated indirectly in the research. Thus, first of all children were invited to take part and, subsequently, the authorization of those responsible for them was also requested. For the most part this was a female relative (mother, grandmother, aunt or sister of the child) who helped the child in its meeting with the interviewer. In addition to adjusting the recording device for the online meeting, some guardians were present during the conversation and acted by clarifying questions or helping to build the answer when the child did not know what or how to answer.

Considering the complexity of the experience that was the object of our study, we chose to prioritize the building of research meetings that would favor trusting relationships between researchers and children. Therefore, we decided on the criterion of familiarity to reach the children and to get closer to them and their families. The children who were invited were known to the team members – friends, godchildren, relatives, students, neighbors, daughters of friends, and acquaintances. This criterion proved to be more appropriate both for the conditions of access to children and for the potential trust and acceptance that the theme demanded.

Despite the importance of these justifications, sometimes the criterion of familiarity proved to be problematic, for example, when the researcher, because they "already knew" the child, abdicated from asking or exploring a question in more depth for supposedly already having that information. Another situation that the research field presented us with occurred during two interviews, when children who were friends with the child being interviewed asked to participate in the ongoing conversation. One of them, in a family environment, the other with neighboring children, in a context where social distancing was incipient. In these two cases, the interview became a collective one, but the analysis was individual.

We conducted interviews that took the form of conversations with the children. Most of them occurred through videoconferences or voice calls using an application. However, as noted above, some were face-to-face when the researcher was a family member or lived in some way with the children[10]. It is worth noting that all interviews were audio and/or video-recorded and then transcribed and analyzed in the research groups.

Similarly to the NEPEI/UFMG survey, our data analyses showed that girls were more present, with 42 participants, than boys, with 31

participants. The children represented all ages from 4 to 12 years old[11], but the largest number of children was in the 8, 9, and 10-year age range.

As one of the criteria was being resident in the state capital or Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro, children from 10 of the 22 municipalities took part: Duque de Caxias, Itaboraí, Magé, Nova Iguaçu, Nilópolis, Niterói, Rio Bonito, Rio de Janeiro, São Gonçalo and Tanguá. Of the children who lived in the capital, we had representatives from the following areas and neighborhoods: a) North: Cachambi, (Estrada do) Camboatá, Cascadura, Complexo da Maré (Nova Holanda, Conjunto Esperança), Cordovil, Engenho de Dentro, Inhaúma, Irajá, Pavuna, Pilares, Rocha, Tijuca, Vila Isabel and Vila da Penha, b) West: Campo Grande, Freguesia, Inhoaíba, Realengo, Santa Cruz, Taquara and Vila Valqueire, c) South: Flamengo, Laranjeiras, Santa Teresa, Fonte da Saudade (Lagoa), d) Center.

Always paying attention to the children's perspectives, we organized the interview script into 4 blocks: 1) data on the child and their family group: with the aim of gathering data on identity, socioeconomic characterization and schooling, 2) situations and experiences in/of the pandemic: with an approach to everyday activities, concerns, family relationships and school activities in the current context, 3) perspectives for the future: with open questions for them to express their feelings, emotions and utopias, both in the individual and social spheres, and 4) other and appendices: a time for them to ask or tell something specific. As such, at the end of the conversations with the children, our proposal was to encourage them to express their experiences, perceptions and feelings using different languages, such as, for example, drawings and photographs. They chose drawing, but only 19 children did so, which was photographed and then sent by email or via the messaging app to their researcher. With this framework, we intended to analyze how the children presented themselves and identified themselves socially and economically.

"Tell me a little about yourself" – Identity, Family, and School Characteristics

The conversation/interview with the children started with two questions: Can you introduce yourself to me? Tell me a little about you. The objective was to make the children feel free to talk about themselves, their family and school, a story full of expressions, gestures, grimaces, body movements and also unspoken words. In the analyses of the transcripts that occurred in the research groups, we tried to understand and capture these actions in relation to our research problem. We also quantified their answers as we made comparisons between them. It is for this reason that we state that our research is both qualitative and quantitative in nature, because this arises from the nature of our specific objectives, "[…] with the understanding that in social phenomena there is the possibility of analyzing regularities, frequencies, but also relationships, histories, representations, points of view and internal logic of the subjects in action" (Minayo, 2007, p. 63).

The quantitative data helped us in the interpretation of the qualitative questions, an effort of sociological imagination, in the sense given by Mills (1972), to make known the problems of individual realities in correlation with broader social realities. In addition, we opted for questions aimed at self-reported gender, racial, generational, geographic location and education issues. With this choice, we confirmed that children have the right to express their identity and their opinions.

Even knowing the scope of the two questions that started the conversation, if the children were brief in making this presentation of themselves there was an instruction in the script for the researcher to put the questions in a more direct way, because we wanted to know: a) the child's name, b) if it identified itself as a boy, girl or if it did not want to answer, c) how it identified its color, race or if it did not wish to answer, d) its age and if it recognized itself as a child.

The 73 children started the conversation by introducing themselves by name, with rare exceptions it was the researcher asked them to continue presenting themselves. Regarding their generational identification, 30 of them said they were children, 05 were pre-adolescents, 01 said they were both a teenager and a child, 03 were unable to answer and 09 of them did not answer. This information was missing in 25 of the interviews. The question asked, not asked and the question not answered, as well as the answers that affirm who our respondents are or who they are not, give us indications to reflect on the bonds that condition the relationships and the societal organization of this time (Castro, 2008). Childhood is a generation with a diversity of ages and physical, cognitive and emotional development, therefore it cannot be conceived in a hegemonic way, as it is at one and the same time stable and changeable (Qvortrup, 2011). Through their answers or lack of answers, children break with the discursiveness established when they affirm what adults expect from them.

It is important to point out the recurrence of cases in which the question was not asked or there was no answer, which denotes that this is not a social debate that has already been instituted. Added to this is the option of building a group of child interlocutors based on familiarity criteria, which could lead to the cloudiness of what was supposedly already known or, as in some cases where the interview was attended by a family member, the question ceased to be asked or answered, whether due to some discomfort caused by the complexity of the theme, or due to other *a priori* interferences, such as religion. This complexity was present in gender identification.

Studies in this field have been pointing out that more than the answer to an already given classification, gender is a construction that permeates subjectivation processes. Out of the total of our group, in 17 interviews this question was not asked, in 14 of them there was no answer and 03 children did not know how to answer. Therefore, only 53.4% of them answered the question, with 24 recognizing themselves as girls and 15 as boys. Gender self-reporting had a socio-political character for us, since it broke with the objectivity, neutrality and impartiality built

on their bodies. Manifesting oneself or not about one's gender, asking or not asking about the gender of the other, warns us about how femininities and masculinities are constructed, the expectations, distinctions and demands placed on them (Felipe, 2000).

It is also worth noting that, for Butler (2003, p. 24), however much sex seems to be something biological, "[…] gender is culturally constructed: consequently, it is neither the causal result of sex, nor is it as apparently as fixed as sex is". Thus, this distinction makes room for gender as a multiple interpretation of sex. However, the author asserts that gender is not always constituted in a coherent or consistent manner in different historical contexts, and

> […] because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities, it becomes impossible to separate the notion of 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained (Butler, 2003, p. 20).

Therefore, the socially posited binarism of being a boy or a girl is reflected both in the question and in the answer, showing how the complexities involved in gender issues are often intangible in an interview and end up being reduced to the norm.

Another category with absence, confusion and variability of answers was racial identification. Talking about one's color can raise countless questions for children who live in a society in which racism is structural.

As other researchers have pointed out, children are racially aware at the perceptual and conceptual levels and their classification modes are multiple and not bipolar (Rocha; Rosemberg, 2007; Fazzi, 2000). The children gave us different answers for the color of their skin: dark, white, brown, dark brown, brown, black, mestizo, normal, light, red, "I think I'm white", "more or less", "neither white nor black", "not white" and "I think my skin is dark". One child did not know, two did not want to answer and another said: "I don't know, I don't care much about color". Again, the number of interviews without this information was high, corresponding to 28.8% of the 73 interviews.

In their presentation of different color modulations, the children used the vocabulary of public institutes (white, brown, black) and other variations. Some showed doubt – "I think I'm white" –, others used the negative – "I don't know", "It's not white" –, others expressed something intermediate – "more or less, neither white nor black", "I think my skin is darker", "lighter" – and the words normal and red also appear in the answers, which makes us wonder what this normalness or this red skin might be. In the characterization of color/race, 21 children did not provide this information, which reiterates what has already been said in relation to gender: there is difficulty in asking and answering these identity questions. It is also necessary to highlight the unique situation of the interview/conversation by asking children unusual questions. This

led one of them to respond in an obvious way to a preference for a certain color, in this case, the color green.

Whereas color/race and gender caused discomfort, on the other hand talking about schooling mobilized the children. We asked them if they attended school, what grade they were in or what class they were in, and if they knew the name of the institution and whether it was public or private. It was good to see that there was no distortion between age and grade/stage. Regarding the administrative category of the school – public or private – only 11 children were unable to answer, did not comment or did not have this information. We recorded a higher number of enrollments in private schools, 35 answers, compared to 27 who said they studied in public schools. The school category elicited from the children some ways of answering us that make us wonder how they perceive the relationship between public and private:

> Manuela (6 years old): If it (the school) were public, my mother would be very pleased, because then she wouldn't need to pay (laughs).
> Mirela (9 years old): Private, my mother spends a fortune on it.
> Alisson (8 years old): I think it's public. […] I'd prefer a private one.
> Researcher: Why, Alisson?
> Alisson: Because a private school is better than a public one.
> Researcher: What do you think is better there? […]
> Alisson: Because it's cleaner, more obedient, there are more students who are polite.
> Researcher: And it's not like that at your school?
> Alisson: Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't.

The public-private debate is complex and marked by the families' ownership of economic, social and cultural resources, which means that the choice of school is based on different criteria: practical, functional, internal to the educational process and/or adjusted to psychological characteristics of children (Rezende; Nogueira; Nogueira, 2011). Despite this choice, the fact is that children perceive social inequalities, reflected in public funding, which still fails to promote equity and quality in education for all, and a private education system that operates according to the logic of the market.

As it was an interview/conversation with subjective questions, we were not able to determine the socioeconomic status of the children, but we have some clues when we analyze, in addition to the administrative characteristic of the school, family structure, type of housing and what their parents' work means to them. We found that 46.5% of the children lived in families comprised of a model which consists of a mother, father and siblings. The mother is the central figure in this arrangement, but the children also revealed a diversity of family arrangements, such as: a) mother and sibling(s); b) mother, father, uncle(s)/aunt(s) and brother(s); c) only the mother or father; d) mother, father and grandparents; e) mother, father, grandparents and sibling(s); f) mother, stepfather and grandparents; g) mother, grandparents and uncle(s)/aunt(s); h) mother, grandparents, uncle or aunt and sibling(s); j) mother, grandparents, sibling(s); k) mother, father, uncle/aunt and cousins; and l) grandmother or grandfather.

These families live in two main types of housing, as mentioned by the children, i.e. apartment or house, classified as: a) apartment in a building or condominium; b) single storey house, two-storey house, house with up to 3 storeys and house on a smallholding. The highest percentage of types of housing related to houses, 42.4% compared to 24.6% who lived in apartments.

We found that in 40 families one or more family members went out to work during the pandemic, 05 children stated that their guardians worked remotely and 05 indicated that a relative was unemployed, usually their mother. Only 14 children named the work of those they lived with: in a school nursery (mother); civil servant and school director (mother); university teacher (mother); teacher and gym owner (mother and father); teacher (mother); maid (mother); works in a school office (grandfather); electrician and store saleswoman (father and mother); sushiman (father); cleaning lady and mason (mother and father); cleaning lady and furniture assembler/takeaway seller (mother and father); works with *açaí* [a type of fruit/berry] (mother); takeaway seller (father); *açaí* delivery woman (mother).

We know that regardless of social class, children suffer more from the hardships of their class when compared to the adult generation. And this identity and socioeconomic panorama tells us, once again, that children are born within a class, not just within their family, and what they are or will become in the future is a class situation (Benjamin, 1984). In this sense, the condition of social class is learned from the experiences that occur right from birth, in the relationships and social interactions with their close environment and in the decoding of symbols, signs and cultural and economic values.

What the children say about coronavirus

The children, in their different ways of saying and feeling, presented their understanding of the pandemic which, at the time of the interview, had already lasted for more than a year: an experience of chronological time (*chronos*) that advanced and that was measured by hours, days, months and years, but insufficient to express the singular intensity of what was lived (*ayón*) and to talk about the opportunities that arose (*kairós*), of what is unprecedented that and relationships, routines and feelings. When talking about the pandemic, they allude to situations in which they took part or not in spaces such as: home, street, school, friends' or grandparents' homes. Being able to be in these places or not and what could be done in them marked the experience of each of them in the pandemic:

> Manuela (6 years old): [what was bad about it?] Having to stay at home for a long time with nothing to do, I had already played with everything there was to play with and there was nothing else to play with.
> Dan (4 years old): Oh, when the pandemic calmed down a bit, then I could go out and play here in the neighborhood.

Luísa (5 years old): I almost completely stopped going to the parks to play […]. Then, later, given that my staircase has a handrail, it's made from cooper, there are two metal supports under it in one place… so I kept climbing up the staircase, but like a little monkey. I didn't use the steps, I climbed up the staircase using the handrail.

Rafaela (7 years old): I missed school a lot, yeah, I missed by class a lot as well.

Maria Júlia (5 years old): Because [at school] you can't go on the toys, otherwise coronavirus will get on the toys and then the child will touch the toys and will get coronavirus. Then, they'll die.

Thus, we noted that in the interviews the children showed singular voices, but also collective ones. When asked what they knew about coronavirus, they all had information. What they said revolved around defining covid-19 as a disease that kills people, a strong, evil virus, a bad thing, very small.

Miguel (7 years old): I know that we should wear a mask, always. I also know that we have to wear a mask because covid gets on us, there is a chance of dying or there is a chance that we will not die, [while still] a child. But if a child catches covid, I think the chance of dying is lower. I know it's a virus and if someone catches it they could die. It's contagious. And I guess that's all I know.

Pedro (11 years old): Coronavirus? I don't know anything. I only know that coronavirus, they're very small, that there are germs and bacteria as well. When there are germs, the viruses, they get inside, infect the bacteria and the germs. That's all I know.

Luísa (5 years old): I've heard that the coronavirus is a very strong disease, that now the elderly are even taking the third dose [of the vaccine] and they have to wear a mask, that's why I'm going to school wearing a mask.

Letícia (10 years old): It's a very dangerous virus.

Lorenzo (10 years old): It is a disease. It's a disease that takes away your sense of taste. You have no sense of taste, you have fever, it seems, you feel tired and I think you have no appetite.

In several answers, children bring up the theme of death. People die, relatives die, children can die or pass the virus on to the elderly, who can die. Death, fear of dying or of passing the virus on to others was recurrent and characterize the disease itself.

All the children also spoke about protection through the use of a mask, gel alcohol, washing hands and staying at home. But some brought solutions such as being vaccinated and others showed a desire to end the virus in a personal way: "I also think it sucks, I want to punch the coronavirus in the face… give it, like, [makes body movements]], then the coronavirus falls to the ground… it's dead" (Eduardo, 7 years old); "If I had a magic wand, I would get the coronavirus out of every city" (Rafaela, 7 years old).

Some voices expressed horizontality between adults and children, because, although many of them had information about the coronavirus from adults – mother, father, teacher –, many also learned from television, from friends. Elon (8 years old), for example, answered how he found out about the coronavirus like this: "*everyone is talking about*

it", that is, there is no way not to know about the coronavirus because this was the subject at that time. Pedro (11 years old) found out "[…] when everyone started talking about the coronavirus. I didn't even know the coronavirus was there. Then my friends started talking. They just said that now the coronavirus is spreading through the streets, the countries". Luna (9 years old) said: "I heard about it from my friends". Davi's answer (8 years old) shows that there are few explanations about the coronavirus: "I think it's a very bad thing, we're losing people in the world. […] But they never explained it very well, but my mother explained it a little bit".

Feelings and utopias

It must be said that several feelings crossed our research while it was being done: the struggle for life and childhood studies, affection for colleagues who instigated us to carry out the research, dwelling on something that we already wanted to be distant, getting ready for the meeting, the interviews taking place, talking and listening, the singularity of the perspectives, the silences full of meanings, the constraints in the conversation, the technological and/or health barriers that prevented a hug from being given just when it was most needed, changing the subject as an escape and salvation, re-elaborations throughout the conversation, writing as a reencounter… As already mentioned, feelings operate as a way of sticking to the present time, a way of perceiving/understanding the production of social reality and, in the case of this research, of imagining futures to nurture utopia while recording that which substantiates what has already been lived.

The feelings expressed by children in relation to the pandemic were diverse and somewhat paradoxical, contradictory and even ambivalent.

> Gustavo (6 years old): After the pandemic arrived, everyone was scared.
> Davi (8 years old): I think it was a little bit cool and a little bit tedious. The annoying part was we that couldn't go out to places and the cool part was that I didn't go to school.
> Alana (7 years old): I think the pandemic is bad because it brought nostalgia. Before, I didn't miss people much, it was just a few days, but with the pandemic, it was a year and a half.
> Maria Beatriz (5 years old): You know what I liked to do? I used to mess around on my mother's bed. Pretending it was a trampoline.
> Samuel (4 years old): Happy for staying at home and not becoming ill.
> Rafaela (7 years old): I like to play, I like to… I have a YouTube channel […]. I also like to take classes on our computer, I like to watch my videos on YouTube.

On the one hand, worries, fear of becoming ill or losing a family member, losses that are happening, missing friends because of social distancing, mainly due to the suspension of classes; on the other hand, hope for better days and an undisguised joy of – in some cases – having parents and guardians more present in everyday life, discovering new

ways of playing, the unusual experience of not having to go to school, the less controlled use of available technologies, justified moreover by access to remote classes.

Among these mixed feelings, Sereno and Luna moved us with the depth of what they said, while Giovana, who had lost her mother to a disease other than covid-19, indicated that talking about feelings also implies other feelings, that are slow to be absorbed and are more than words can say. They provoked displacements and affected us, a sharing of feelings:

> Sereno (9 years old): I have a lot of information, but I'll tell you about the main information I have first […]. Nowadays, covid is undergoing a lot of genetic mutations, which are making it very strong, which can even result in loss of hope, but in the future we will surely be able to overcome this pandemic.
> Researcher: What else concerns you about this disease?
> Sereno: It was when my father and my great grandfather had covid. And my aunt as well, but sadly she didn't survive this disease.
> Researcher: Really? I'm so sorry, Sereno.
> Researcher: What made you sad?
> Luna (9 years old): Because I couldn't go out to play with my friends anymore and I was afraid that my best friend would forget about me. But, alleluia, she didn't forget me, and now we play robox together.
> Researcher: What feelings has this pandemic awakened in you?
> Giovana (9 years old): A lot of things. Fear and missing people I like.
> Researcher: Let's talk about changes caused by the pandemic. What has the pandemic changed in your life?
> Giovana: I don't want to answer this.

Our dialogue with Gabriel and Bento, in this sharing of experiences, are examples of how children articulate the complexity and simplicity of everyday life, breaking some discursive linearities and making the uniqueness of their interpretation as children emerge:

> Researcher: Have you been or are you concerned about this coronavirus thing? […].
> Gabriel (7 years old): Yes. Coronavirus worries me a lot. I'm worried about my family getting it, my friends. So I want them to find a cure soon to get rid of the pandemic.
> Researcher: Are you afraid that they'll get it?
> Gabriel: I'm even afraid that I'll get it.
> Researcher: Really? And do you, and everyone else as well, have a lot of feelings about it? […]. What do you feel? What are your feelings?
> Gabriel: Look, I'm really nervous. Sometimes I get sad. Then my father stays with me, playing with me a little. Then we watch a movie cuddling up in bed. Stay warm. Then he makes some popcorn and we eat it in bed with my mother.
> Researcher: Are you concerned about coronavirus?
> Bento (5 years old): Yes. […]. Because it could kill my family.
> Researcher: And what do you feel?
> Bento: At times I feel I've caught coronavirus, and at times I feel I'm well. Because I'm afraid of dying.
> Researcher: And is there anything that has made you happy during the pandemic?

(Bento nods that there is).
Bento: Ice cream.

The formulation of utopias and expectations for the future showed that many children perceived the present as an unusual and controlled moment, marked by health measures and by discourses repeated every day about the pandemic: "All of a sudden, all we talk about is covid" (Pedro, 9 years old); "Oh, it's very tedious" (Letícia, 5 years old). Even future projections brought this feeling of containment and control of the present time: "I will be able to go wherever I want, free and without having to schedule things too much, because now we have to schedule things so as to avoid overcrowding" (Letícia, 9 years old). Differently to simply existing, living, "normal", having to keep thinking and scheduling, made the disease present, setting the scene.

Expectations as to the future were also diverse. Letícia (9 years old), for example, brings a somewhat dystopian perspective: "I dream of a world like that Bradesco advertisement. Have you seen it? Which is like, the whole world is made of metal. People use spaceships to walk. Their watches are those technological watches that when you access them you can find everything". It contrasts with the embodied simplicity of the answers of other children who, when asked about what people will do after the pandemic, summarize as follows: "I will live" (Céu, 5 years old); "Eat a good snack and drink *Guaravita* with it" (Mirela, 9 years old); "See people's faces. Embrace them" (Letícia, 10 years old).

It is worth noting that the future was recurrently narrated as "when the pandemic is over", but it was mixed with the past by a feeling of "returning to normal" in everyday life, an expression literally used by 56 children, a future that is also a return to the past and reveals to us the perception they had of the social sphere and the inequalities that constitute it. Looking into the future is also changing what exists, undoing the arrangements and routines imposed by the pandemic, as was the case with Gabriel (7 years old), who had to move and had no way of taking his dog with him: "I wanted my dog Felipe, … he couldn't continue living at my grandmother's house. I was going to make a place for him here in my room. […] Yeah, I'm going to do this, for him to come here. I will. When I finish doing it, he'll come here, I'm sure".

Researcher: Tell me something that you would like to be different.
Alice (12 years old)**:** Many people have lost their jobs due to this pandemic. A lot of my relatives don't have jobs, and I would like them to have one, some kind of job that pays a minimum wage. So that they can take care of themselves too. And that would be good for people and for the whole world too, you know, where there is a lot of trade. This will help other people too. Do you see what I mean?
Anna Julia (10 years old)**:** Ah, I would like the price of food to be not so expensive.
Alana (7 years old): In the world, [I] would like a change regarding racism. In my life, nothing, because it's great.

Gabriel, in turn filled with the imagination that once moved Thomas More, rehearses his Utopia:

Gabriel (12 years old): I can describe a perfect world, I don't know if it's worth it. I think it's easier than saying what needs to be improved.
Researcher: OK.
Gabriel: I think that working and studying are important things in life, because otherwise life would be monotonous and boring. So I think it's necessary [laughs]. But something I think… Things would be more accessible for everybody. Everything would be more accessible and everyone would have, I'm not going to say the same things, because otherwise it doesn't make sense, but everyone would have the minimum, the basics. There would be nothing [of] these things of violence, of war, that kind of thing. That everyone had access to the basics, but also would have to work to have more, no more than the basics, but… Do you understand? […].
Researcher: But those basics you said everyone should have, what are they?
Gabriel: It's housing, food, money for you to have what you want. But not much more than that, just enough for you to live relatively well, which is what everyone wants. For you not to be in great need, but you wouldn't have a mansion. You would just live well.

Final considerations

We are aware that much has been discussed about the pandemic, but we consider that children and their childhoods still remain as silenced and invisible categories. In this sense, we understand that our research contributes to the extent that it reveals the vision that children have of the world they live in, which only they can tell us about based on the generational place they occupy. We adults are still learning to translate and understand them, because, as Castro (2008) reminds us, we still forge an identification with what we imagine their desires and interests might be.

To a certain extent, this is what we sought through this research, that is, to understand the feelings, utopias, perceptions and experiences of 73 children from Rio de Janeiro regarding the pandemic period. If we started this text with the presentation of a socio-historical panorama of the measures that were adopted (or not) by the federal, state and municipal governments, this was important for allowing us to understand how children find themselves in the social scenario, in which feelings vanish in polysemic senses, and utopia requires the ability to read the present to project future aspirations.

Similar to the NEPEI study (Silva; Luz; Carvalho, 2021), completing this research has not only been a theoretical challenge, but also an ethical, aesthetic and political one, in the sense of apprehending the living conditions of children, the exercising of their rights, and their sensitivity and creativity in taking (or not talking) about what affects them. Something that has that put us face to face with issues that are controversial for them and for us, especially when dealing with generational, gender and racial issues. Unasked or unanswered questions reveal the complexity involved when it is childhood that is being talked about and dealt with.

Complexity, but also simplicity, when children tell us about their feelings, when they think and explain another world to us. Feeling and imagining another possible world was in the sense of a reordering of relationships and spaces, from dreaming to resolving practical issues, the choices of which cannot be made outside the dream, but which enable different possibilities (Krenak, 2019).

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Notes

1 In agreement Boeno (2022) we use spelling: covid-19, with no capital letter,

2 The study was conducted by the following university professors: Conceição Firmina Seixas Silva (UERJ), Deise Arenhart (UFRJ), Lisandra Ogg Gomes (UERJ), Núbia Oliveira dos Santos (UFRJ), Patrícia Corsino (UFRJ) and Rita Marisa Ribes Pereira (UERJ). University teachers Flávia Maria de Menezes (UERJ) and Jordanna Castelo Branco (UERJ) took part in a later stage.

3 On the same issue, on 06/02/2020 the Federal Administration decreed and enacted Law No. 13979 (Brasil, 2020b). By means of Decree No. 47246, dated 12/03/202, the Rio de Janeiro City Administration put Law No. 13979 into force and similarly established measures to address covid-19 (Rio de Janeiro, 2020a).

4 Community transmission happens internally, in cities, and is not related to travel situations.

5 Data organized daily by the *Centro de Informações Estratégicas e Resposta de Vigilância em Saúde* - CIEVS-RJ (Center for Health Surveillance Strategic Information and Response) of the Rio de Janeiro State Health Department, based on the *esus-VE* and *SIVEP-Gripe* systems, in articulation with the surveillance services of the state's municipal health departments. Available from: https://painel.saude.rj.gov.br/monitoramento/covid19.html#. Viewed on January 8, 2023.

6 The time period cited, from 2020 to 2022, is justified by the start of the pandemic and the conclusion of the study's analyses.

7 Convention on the Rights of the Child (Brasil, 1990a) and the *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente* – ECA (Child and Adolescent Statute) (Brasil, 1990b).

8 During this period, school activities took place in both the face-to-face and the online form. Private schools were able to return to face-to-face activities with effect from 01/10/2020 (Rodrigues, 2020). State Decree No. 47300 pointed to the need for municipal and state public schools to prepare for the return to face-to-face activities (Rio de Janeiro, 2020b), which took place over the course of 2021.

9 The following study, research and extension groups took part in the research: *Educação Infantil e Relações Raciais: narrativas positivas e potentes da Cultura Afro-Brasileira e Africana* (GEERREI/UFRJ), *Espaço de Práticas e Pesquisa sobre Infância (EPPI/UERJ), Infância, Cultura e Docência na Educação Infantil* (UFRJ), *Infância, Linguagem e Educação* (GEPILE/UFRJ), *Infância e Cultura contemporânea* (GPICC/UERJ) and *Território dos Estudos da Infância* (TEI/UERJ).

10 In these cases the health protocols of the time were respected.

11 One child, upon seeing his brother being interviewed, expressed interest in taking part as well, but it was only during the interview that he mentioned having recently turned 13. We kept his interview in the study out of respect for the child and considering he had only recently become 13.

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