

Children, culture and participation: a look at media education in Brazil

Crianças, cultura e participação: um olhar sobre a mídia-educação no Brasil

Niños, cultura y participación: una mirada hacia la educación para los medios en Brasil

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Abstract *This study presents a discussion about the trajectory of the field of communication and education in Brazil. While not an exhaustive analysis of the subject, it identifies the main theoretical contributions that underlie this field providing a retrospective of some of the main practices in Brazil and their influence on other Latin American countries. The text highlights new paradigms in communication education theories that offer a different understanding of educational and cultural uses of the media, and of initiatives for media production with children, which are responses to demands that emerge from their particular contexts of reception, consumption and appropriation.*

Keywords: *Children. Media education. Educommunication. Participation. Cultural production.*

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Resumo *O artigo apresenta uma reflexão sobre a trajetória de constituição do campo da comunicação e educação no Brasil. Sem a pretensão de se caracterizar como uma leitura exaustiva sobre o tema, o artigo busca identificar os principais aportes teóricos que fundamentam o campo lançando um olhar retrospectivo sobre algumas das principais práticas realizadas no Brasil e quais as influências que provocaram em outros países da América Latina. O texto reserva uma especial atenção aos novos paradigmas nas teorias da comunicação-educação que apontam para uma outra compreensão dos usos educacionais e culturais das mídias e de iniciativas de produção midiática com as crianças a partir das demandas que emergem de seus contextos particulares de recepção, consumo e apropriação.*

Palavras-chave: *Crianças Mídia-educação. Educomunicação. Participação. Produção cultural.*

Resumen *El artículo presenta una reflexión sobre la trayectoria de la constitución del campo de la comunicación y de la educación en Brasil. Sin la pretensión de convertirse en una lectura exhaustiva sobre el tema, el trabajo pretende identificar las principales aportaciones teóricas que fundamentan este campo, arrojando una mirada retrospectiva sobre algunas de las principales prácticas llevadas a cabo en Brasil y sobre las influencias que han provocado en otros países de América Latina. El texto reserva una especial atención a los nuevos paradigmas en las teorías de la comunicación-educación, que apuntan a otro tipo de comprensión de los usos educativos y culturales de los medios de comunicación y de las iniciativas de la producción mediática con niños a partir de las necesidades que surgen de sus contextos particulares de recepción, consumo y apropiación.*

Palabras-clave: *Niños. Educación para los medios. Educomunicação. Participación. Producción cultural.*

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Introduction

This study highlights some of the characteristics, singularities, and challenges of current thinking and studies about media education in Brazil, hoping to broaden discussion of the subject. Our objective is not to present an exhaustive overview of the field of communication and education in the country, but to offer a basic outline of the current scenario, focusing mainly on the cultural production by children in and out of schools. We know that most of the cultural production by children today dialogs with media references, even when they are not working directly with the media. Our analysis is based on a variety of personal observations of children in schools over many years.

Defining the field in Brazil

The relation between communication and education in Brazil had been established long before terms such as “media education,” “educommunication” or even “education for the media” had entered into general circulation. In the early 1960s, the work of Paulo Freire had a seminal influence on the construction of a theory of education as social practice in dialogue with communication and culture. Freire advocated that reading the world preceded reading the word, and that the critical dimension in studying involves an active reception of texts, in which the student takes on the role of the subject: “It is impossible to study seriously if the person who studies places him-herself in front of the text as if he-she were magnetized by the author’s word, which is imbued with a kind of magic force. If one behaves passively, ‘tamely’, (...) one lets oneself be invaded by what the author states” (FREIRE, 1981:8-9). The dialogic dimension of communication – which implies reciprocity – and the communicative dimension of education are the other pillars of Freire’s thought.

Paulo Freire’s ideas have influenced a large number of initiatives in popular education in Brazil, and later in many other Latin America

countries and the entire world. In this context, “the social practice of what we now call media education was considered an important form of resistance,” as observed by Monica Fantin (2006:65). To devote special attention to the ideological action of the communication media, a project was created in the 1960s: Critical Reading of the Communication Media (*Leitura Crítica dos Meios de Comunicação*), by the Brazilian Christian Communication Union (*União Cristã Brasileira de Comunicação*) (UCBC), aimed at educators, youth groups and low income communities. It emphasized educating students to develop a critical analysis of the media, particularly including children’s reception, and suggested that families should use what children see on TV as opportunities “for wider discussions about family, political, economic and social issues” (MORAN, 1991:28). The project suggested that strategies for analyzing television with children should be more playful and creative than simple group discussions, and although experiences with video production by children were not frequent in schools, they were already considered to be desirable.

In the mid-1970s, the “total language pedagogy” (*pedagogia da linguagem total*) by Costa-Rican pedagogist Francisco Gutierrez had a significant influence in Brazil. Gutierrez was a precursor of the idea of opening up schools to new forms of cultural production in view of the growing emergence of new forms of social communication media. His methodological proposal articulated with Paulo Freire’s epistemology, which proposed that literacy should involve a “reading” of the world and an ability to express the world. This may be perceived as the embryo of media education methodologies and educommunication, which emphasize the production of communication by the subjects involved in practices of school mediation.

In the late 1980s, research about communication in Latin America had a sociocultural turning point with the proliferation of reception studies. Field research across the continent transferred their focuses from strategies for manipulation and massification attributed to the cultural industry to the manners by which the lower and middle classes perceive

and appropriate media messages, which inspired a dialogue with cultural studies in other countries. In Latin America, this debate became more noticeable and gained theoretical-methodological solidity through studies by authors such as Néstor García Canclini, Guillermo Orozco and, above all, Jesús Martín-Barbero.

These two contributions – the proposal to encourage creative production with the media in schools, and the emphasis on audience activity as empirically verified by reception studies – were fundamental for configuring the current relationship between communication and education in Brazil. These were the ingredients needed to achieve what Paulo Freire had affirmed years earlier: “that the importance of the reading act always implies critical perception, interpretation and a “re-writing” of what is read” (FREIRE, 1981:13).

This extensive collection of material led, for example, to the foundation of studies about the relation between communication and education by the School of Communications and Art (ECA) of the University of São Paulo (*Escola de Comunicações e Artes da Universidade de São Paulo*), where the term *educommunication* was adopted (to include the management of communication in educational spaces to the approaches of critical reading and youth media production). ECA launched the Journal of Communication and Education (*Revista Comunicação e Educação*), which for over 15 years has promoted critical thinking about the subject. Since 1991, with the creation of the Working Group for Education and Communication (*Grupo de Trabalho Educação e Comunicação*), the discussions about the theme in general, under different theoretical-methodological approaches, have earned a place in the National Association for Graduate Research in Education (*Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Educação*).

Other influences external to Latin America have contributed to constituting the field in Brazil. Research from countries such as France, the United States, England, and Italy have had a noticeable impact, particularly since the 1990s. One example of a study that dialogs with European media education theoreticians is the work by Maria Luíza Belloni, who,

in the late 1980s and early 1990s, produced the Program for the Education of the Televiewer (*Programa de Formação do Telespectador*), a teaching manual that proposed a critical reading of the media, and her book *O que é Mídia-Educação* [What is Media-Education] (2001). A greater emphasis on reading, appropriation and creative production on the part of receivers gained strength with the circulation of the work of British authors such as David Buckingham and Cary Bazalgette. The critical theories of U.S. authors such as Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and Douglas Kellner were a reference for studies mindful of forms of re-signification and resistance constructed by consumers of media products.

Over the last decade, the exchange has intensified through an international discussion in the media education field, mainly at meetings such as the 4th World Summit on Media for Children and Adolescents, (*IV Cúpula Mundial de Mídia para Crianças e Adolescentes*) in 2004, which was promoted by the Rio de Janeiro municipal government with UNESCO support. There have also been joint-research programs such as the partnerships between research groups from the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) and the Federal University at Santa Catarina (UFSC) with Pier Cesare Rivoltella from the Catholic University in Milan (UCSC/Milano), among others. The Brazilian Ministry of Education's policy to foment research has stimulated the organization of several missions of Brazilian scholars especially to France, Portugal, Italy, Spain and England, as well as the visit of scholars in the field of media education from those countries and from Latin America to Brazil, to take part in events and short courses.

Challenges

If, on the one hand, this greater exchange is absolutely fundamental, especially at a time of media convergence and in a field so intensely marked by globalization, on the other hand, it also brings challenges. This is pointed out, for example, by Juvenal Zanchetta Jr., for whom edu-

cational proposals for the media from Europe often “tend to complicate the handling of issues that are fundamental to a program about media in Brazilian schools” (ZANCHETTA JR., 2009). Zanchetta reviews the contextual differences between European Union countries, where there are several agencies, programs and regulations in the field of media education, and Brazil, where this is far from the case.

In his reading of European documents about trends in media education, Zanchetta observes the minor role given to schools, and that governments and other entities have most of the responsibility for programs in this field. In Brazil, however, according to Zanchetta, “‘self-didacticism’ prevails on the part of teachers and students, together with school actions of a voluntary nature, which are in a less advanced stage than those in several European countries, which have at their disposal different public and private entities for the preparation and follow-up of the process of media appropriation” (ZANCHETTA JR., 2009:13). To illustrate the gravity of the Brazilian situation, he mentions the actions of the Council for Self-Regulation of Advertising (*Conselho de Auto-Regulamentação da Publicidade*), which he considers to be focused on defending corporate interests and not on controlling abusive advertising.

Therefore, it is important not to automatically adopt suggestions found in international media education policies, because they emerge from contexts with greater institutional consolidation in the field of education and where there are established mechanisms for social control of the media. We must consider, as does Zanchetta, the great concentration of ownership of the communication media in Brazil, its organization in large multimedia conglomerates, and the homogenization of the ensuing discourse. An example of this is the neo-liberal argument that “the best media control is remote control,” which is promoted by representatives of communication companies every time that an initiative for organized social debate arises, for example, about the development of criteria for television programming. Thus, it seems important to us, in agreement with Zanchetta’s suggestion, to strengthen initiatives for the training of teachers in media education for a “repoliticization of school” and the

construction of an increased appreciation of group cultures that are now silenced. (ZANCHETTA, 2009: 16).

This concept is found in many media education studies in Brazil, both in practice and in research. A recent academic mapping of the field explicitly adopted this activist stance, defending the idea that “there cannot be citizenship without the critical and creative appropriation, by all citizens, of the media made available to society by technical progress” (BÉVORT and BELLONI, 2009: 2). According to these authors, at the 1999 UNESCO International Conference, Educating for the Media and Digital Age, held in Vienna, Brazil was among the countries that reaffirmed the importance of media education for citizenship, democratization and social justice, in contrast with the emphasis of wealthy countries on “the training of critical, independent and participative individuals” (idem:13). The picture of the Brazilian situation projected by Bévort and Belloni identifies the difficulties faced in the consolidation of media education: the scant importance given to it in the initial and continuing education of teachers; the lack of defined public policies for the sector; the lack of resources for action and research; the use of “ready-made formulas” for the classroom, rather than discussion during the training of teachers; and the presence in schools of technologies used merely in an instrumental way.

The emphasis on citizenship is highlighted in a number of studies, including that of Monica Fantin (2006), who observes that in countries such as Brazil, “we do a lot of media education, but we do not always call it that” (FANTIN, 2006:66). By identifying the current notion that “the practical dimension of media education in Latin America is considered to be stronger than the reflective dimension’, Fantin comments: “In Brazil, and perhaps in Latin America at large, social demands are so numerous and the situation so urgent, that several people and institutions have begun to undertake projects that intervene, create and invent experiences about this theme without serious consideration and the necessary theorization” (FANTIN, 2006:66). Nevertheless, she continues, the work done by Latin American researchers has been recognized in-

ternationally, due “both to the richness of their experiences in the field of educational-productive-creative actions of social practice, and to the ensuing theoretical reflections.” (idem:67)

A greater presence of media education in teacher training is demanded by the great majority of scholars in this field in Brazil, who indicate that there is much to be done to implement this training widely. In the past three years, the Ministry of Education has conducted a curriculum reformulation for undergraduate pedagogy courses, coupled with a great effort by professors concerned with this discipline, to somehow have it become part of the curricula of their courses. As a result of this struggle, many of the schools of education at the leading federal universities now have a course in at least one of these subjects: “Media and Technology,” “Communication and Education,” “Education and Media Culture,” or something similar.

We know that the mere existence of a course is not enough to ensure the qualitative transformation needed, and the results of this recent curricular change will only be felt in the next generation of teachers emerging from these courses. Therefore, the educators in our field need to continue to study the process of theoretical-methodological and pedagogic construction, to be capable of inspiring the training of the country’s teachers, in a sense that transcends a merely technical and operational perspective of media in education.

Another challenge of the process of media education development in our country is the often faulty relationship between academic research and the day-to-day life in schools. This is part of the reason for the insufficient presence of media education in the curricula of elementary, intermediary and high schools, and few schools conduct systematic work in this field, despite the fact that the National Curriculum Parameters (*Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais*) issued by the Ministry of Education determine that one of a schools’ general objectives is to teach students to “know how to use different sources of information and technological resources to acquire and to construct knowledge” and to “interpret and benefit from cultural productions

(...) related to different intentions and communication situations” (BRASIL/MEC/SEF, 1997:6).

Nevertheless, there are many positive experiences in this field, such as the collaborative production of the Florianópolis Letter for Media Education (*Carta de Florianópolis para a Mídia-Educação*) (in GIRARDELLO and FANTIN, 2009a:161), an intensive process that in 2006 gathered teams of educators from municipal schools together with university researchers in the city of Florianópolis, in Santa Catarina State. Among the Letter’s objectives was to demand inclusion of media education in teacher training and emphasize the importance of the effective participation of children, youth and adults in Media Education projects. Many other similar initiatives throughout Brazil could be mentioned, the result of efforts that, due to difficulties confronted throughout Brazil and those that are specific to each region, we consider to be truly dynamic.

Another characteristic of the Brazilian context regarding media education is one that is eminently cultural. The Brazilian cultural and educational scenario currently encompasses two forces often considered to be contradictory: on one side is a demand for digital inclusion; on the other an emphasis on the need to strengthen popular cultures. This expression, in our continent, does not refer to the world of folklore, museums or mass culture, but rather to a space of exchanges and symbolic tensions that are very much alive in Brazilian society, for example, a variety of manifestations connected to different traditions and ethnicities, such as festivals, religious rituals, and musical, artistic, narrative and scenic repertoires representing Brazil’s great cultural diversity (Cf. GIRARDELLO and FANTIN, 2009b).

An integrated approach to these two trends would therefore be more pertinent; as Martín-Barbero has emphasized, it is the vitality of popular cultures that makes possible resistance to the dilution of local cultures by the globalized media” and it is in the complicity between oral and visual culture “that occurs the specificity of the collective experience of modernity in Latin America” (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 2004, p.351). Therefore, both the total participation in media culture and the valoriza-

tion of diversity and specificities of each community of meaning are situated in the sphere of society's cultural rights. The relationship between media culture and local popular cultures is, in countries like Brazil, a fundamental problem that current theories and methodologies in the field of media education have not yet begun to approach with consistency, let alone satisfactorily articulate.

A question then arises from this scenario: *how can we integrate proposals for media education in Brazil with the strengthening of popular cultures?* A wide variety of cultural experiences found outside schools in Brazil today use digital technologies to revitalize local symbolic production, as can be verified, for example, in the Points of Culture – and Small Points of Cultures network (*Pontos de Cultura – e Pontinhos de Cultura*), which are specifically dedicated to working with children, with support from the Ministry of Culture's *Cultura Viva* project.³ Nevertheless, the relation between this universe and children's learning in schools is still sporadic or incipient.

Communication and education with children

Until the early 1990s, proposals for creative and critical work with children and the media in schools were geared towards aims and objectives rather than to practice. By the late 1990s, due to pioneering studies such as those by FISCHER (1984) and FUSARI (1985) about children's reception of television, the interest of researchers' in this subject began to increase, "perhaps propelled by audience surveys that indicated that children were one of the most assiduous segments of the television audience in Brazil" (DUARTE;SANTIAGO, 2007: 26). Children's reception of television and film became the theme of several studies, with various references, such as cultural studies and theories of Latin American mediations, socio-historical dialogue, and studies about subjectivity inspired by Foucault.

³ See: <http://issuu.com/teia2010/docs/seminarioculturaviva>

As a consequence of these studies, we now have better knowledge of the importance of media culture for Brazilian children than we did 20 years ago. It is now impossible to think about education without considering the role of the media and this is recognized by the most important policy documents in Brazil, such as, for example, the Ministry of Education's National Curricular Directives for Pedagogy Courses (*Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para o Curso de Pedagogia*), which states, in article 5, that teachers must be able to "relate the languages of the communication media to education, in didactic-pedagogic processes" (MEC, 2006). This does not mean, however, that educators always know how to pedagogically respond to the concrete daily challenges of this new context. Thus, another general challenge for Brazilian educators is: *how to help transform what we already know about the relation of children and media culture into references and inspiration for teaching children in schools?*

There is apparently a consensus among researchers in this field that all media reception involves the production and negotiation of meanings that occur through *mediations* – family or school mediation – in which the consumption and the reading of cultural products are considered to be productive instances, in the sense proposed by Martín-Barbero. Another important notion of production discussed in this field is the importance given to *children's experience with producing* media texts (photos, videos, scripts, oral recordings, etc.), so that they can become capable readers who can criticize what they see on television or find on the Internet.

This kind of production increasingly tends to prevail in any consistent proposal for media education, as access to interactive technologies is extended. In this process, as we know, "reading" and "writing" are even more closely associated than in the traditional literacies, requiring educators to focus on *digital literacy* in a wider sense (SOARES, 2002), and on the participation and the visibility of children's media production in schools (OROFINO, 2005). In Brazil, it is possible to affirm that not only the practices that define themselves as educom-

munication, but also media education practices involve production projects that involve both creative participation by children, and the use of multiple languages in text, image, and sound, articulated in the curricular and extra-curricular contents.

In the last decade, mainly due to new policies aimed at Brazil's lower and middle classes, there has been a significant increase in the consumption of communication and information technologies, particularly the acquisition of cell phones and personal computers. The number of schools with Internet access has increased (now at 60%), which is higher than in Argentina (where it is 42%) and Mexico (31%), but still well below the United States, Canada, and Uruguay, where 100% of the schools are connected (ITU/UNESCO, 2010).

A broad study – *TIC Crianças e Internet* [ICT Children and Internet] (BARBOSA, 2010) – conducted by the Brazilian Internet Management Committee with children from 5- 9 from all social classes and regions of Brazil, highlighted that the factor of digital inclusion, in particular Internet access, even if growing, is still a concern. “Although the school is not the principal place of access to the computer, it fulfills an important role in the diffusion of abilities related to its use” (p. 31). In this sense, the low level of Internet access in school mentioned by the children (27%) compared to the use of computers in the schools (40%).

The authors of the study attribute this difference to issues related to infrastructure or to restrictions to use at school, and to a lack of skills and familiarity among teachers' and school staff with using technologies with students. This reiterates in general terms the still noticeable gap between the critical and expressive needs of children and their fulfillment by schools.

Cultural production by and with children

It is important to mention some examples of successful practices that involve theoretical-methodological thinking about not only educommu-

nication but also media education (which are understood here as similar proposals in the sense that they both promote the critical and creative participation of children.) We find the integration of several research methods and cultural practices, beginning with research about reception to map students' cultural consumption, ranging to methodologies of educational work that consider generating themes indicated by students themselves, and finally to media production practices (such as defining and producing reports, educational campaigns and fiction in several formats, with the use of radio, newspaper, animation, electronic books, digital and pinhole photography and audio and visual editing, often shared via the Internet). The most common themes in these projects include citizenship, memory, environment, identity, art and cultural diversity, which are directly or indirectly integrated to the curricula in general.

One important example of this in Brazil is the Educom.radio project, which was developed in the city of São Paulo between 2001 and 2004 by the Nucleus of Communication and Education at the University of São Paulo (*Núcleo de Comunicação e Educação da Universidade de São Paulo*). The project worked with a network of over 450 school radio stations, offering training to educators to prepare them to work with verbal, sound and musical languages. This project resulted in a wealth of knowledge that inspired the University of São Paulo (USP) to create the country's first undergraduate course in educommunication in 2010. Another referential organization is *Midiativa*, which is focused on the quality of audiovisual production for children and youth.⁴ In Rio de Janeiro, useful references for media productions in public schools include the archives of the International Reference Center for Media for Children and Teenagers (*Centro Internacional de Referência em Mídia para Crianças e Adolescentes*),⁵ for municipal schools, and the *Planetapontocom* Project,⁶ for state schools.

⁴ Disponível em: <http://www.midiativa.tv/blog/>

⁵ Disponível em: <http://portalmultirio.rio.rj.gov.br/portal/riomidia/>

⁶ Disponível em: www.planetapontocom.org.br

A very common model for media production in public schools in larger Brazilian cities is exemplified by the Image Workshop [*Oficina de Imagens*],⁷ in Minas Gerais State. This is a non-governmental organization that works with the “experimentation of communication languages in schools, while reflecting on the relations between media and society. One of its actions, the Project *Latanet*, has become a reference because it has trained hundreds of teachers to work with children in municipal schools, with methods ranging from the production of pinhole photography to production for the Internet, with an emphasis on the promotion of citizenship and children’s rights. Similar organizations exist throughout Brazil, operating in schools either directly with children or through workshops for teachers. In Bahia State, *Rede Cipo*⁸ is a reference. It involves public school children and teachers in the creation of websites, radio programs, and printed material about education, cultural identity and social mobilization. The media education workshops with teachers and children from municipal schools in Florianópolis, in Santa Catarina State, promoted by the Florianópolis Children’s Cinema Festival (*Mostra de Cinema Infantil de Florianópolis*) have become a tradition and are now in their tenth consecutive year. Similar initiatives take place in many cities across the country.

A priority of most of these projects is creating more social and institutional space for education and communication proposals, especially in schools. One of the most vigorous and well-structured organizations in this field in Brazil is the News Agency for Childhood Rights (*Agência de Notícias dos Direitos da Infância – ANDI*), which, for nearly 20 years, has devoted itself to the social monitoring of the media from the perspective of children. In 2009, on the occasion of the First National Conference of Communication (I Conferência Nacional de Comunicação), ANDI launched a document produced jointly with other representatives of civil society and government entities, proposing the formulation of regula-

⁷ Disponível em: www.oficinadeimagens.org.br

⁸ www.cipo.org.br

tions to control the relationship between media and childhood in Brazil, suggesting: a nationally integrated policy of insertion of these issues in public schools; the creation of a national program for training teachers in media education; and emphasizing children's participation in the production of contents, as "an important tool for stimulating a critical reading of the communication media and citizen participation" (ANDI, 2009:11). The document highlights the field of the relationship between childhood and the media, observing that throughout the country, "initiatives and projects multiply in this direction – made viable mainly by civil society and universities. (...) However, there is an absolute need for more structural actions directly related to this theme –and this makes it difficult to realize it in practice as a public policy" (idem).

In conclusion, to summarize the main issues discussed, we can mention the award-winning work of the *Fundação Casa Grande* in the small town of Nova Olinda in the *sertão* or semi-arid backlands of northeastern Brazil, where for over 10 years, children have been participating in media production workshops as an activity complementary to school. The documentaries that they produce weekly about themes connected to culture and memory are exhibited to the local population in the town's small movie theater before the feature film. In addition, the children produce and present the Radio Casa Grande FM program (its motto is "the radio that educates"), which is broadcast every day from 7 am to 10 pm. The children also participate in artistic and musical activities, including the production of CDs, in which they participate not only in the creation and performance, but also in recording, mixing and mastering. They also participate in the Children and Young Communicators Network (*Rede de Crianças e Jovens Comunicadores*) of Portuguese-speaking countries, in an exchange program with children from Angola and Mozambique. These endeavors clearly express the resourcefulness and happiness with which the boys and girls involved in the project discuss the meaning of authorship and sharing and the ludic aspect of their productions, which are deeply rooted in their local cultural, and, thanks to the media languages mas-

tered by the children, maintain a rich dialogue with the greater world that lies beyond their rural horizon.

The hundreds of similar initiatives in communities across Brazil challenge educators to more systematically associate to schools the pedagogic discoveries that occur daily in these communities, and to contribute critically to them. This requires even greater effort and theoretical-methodological reflection, in which there is a dialogue not only with international research but also with the many cultural specificities of such a diversified country. At the same time, it is essential to focus on the need for public policies that can provide the conditions and quality needed in the relationship between media and childhood, particularly in the training of teachers to work with the theme. The attention given to all these dimensions seems vital to continue to build a singular, rich and pertinent path for media education in Brazil.

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