

Decolonising public policy: A way forward for caregiver support in Brazil ^[1]

In the Tambor de Crioula, dancers form a literal and metaphorical circle of care

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Source: Van Leer Foundation

Format: Article

Publication Date: 30 Dec 2023

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

Excerpts

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In the Tambor de Crioula, the community forms both a literal and a metaphorical circle of care for caregivers. While mothers enjoy a carefree moment on stage, their babies constantly move from one lap to the next. The experience strengthens the kind of connections in day-to-day life that form a network of mutual support, enabling mothers to share their burdens and find a safe place for their children while they work.

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It creates wellbeing for mothers, fathers and children, reducing anxiety and breaking the cycle of toxic stress so common in a world of racism, sexism and heavy responsibility.

As a space for cultural and personal empowerment, the Tambor embodies resistance against hundreds of years of slavery, racism, and discriminatory public policy. Brazil was the last country in the western hemisphere to abolish slavery, and in the 150 years since then, public policy has forced Afro Brazilians into urban slums, criminalised their cultural and religious practices, excluded them from the job market, and limited their access to good schools and universities. In quilombos, favelas, and other spaces that Black Brazilians have built for themselves, rituals such as the Tambor form a space for passing resistance on to new generations – the foetus feeds on rhythm as on a mother's placenta.

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For many years, early childhood policies in Brazil have often tried to force European and North American practices onto Afro-Brazilian and indigenous populations. For example, well-meaning efforts to motivate women to give birth in hospitals undermine centuries of traditional midwifery that provides essential antenatal support. Home visitors ask parents to play with plastic toys with their kids, subverting active play in nature and traditional care given by older children to younger. Nutritionists favour unfamiliar and expensive fruits such as apples or pears over readily available palm fruits, such as açaí berries, and cupuaçu fruit. Hospitals and schools insist on dealing only with parents and not grandparents, who commonly raise kids in Afro-Brazilian and indigenous groups.

We argue that policy must instead be built from the inside out, based on the epistemologies of diverse communities and their aesthetic forms of belonging. Policy must be made with them and by them, not for them, respecting their collective spaces and practices for support, care, and empowerment for young children and their caregivers. These spaces already exist: public policy must strengthen them, not undermine them.

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Recognising and strengthening these ritual environments and their cultural practices, favouring community life and the production of collective meaning: these elements form the basis for public policy that nurtures diverse forms of early childhood development and support for parents and grandparents, guaranteeing respect for their traditions and ancestry.

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