



Acta Scientiarum. Education

ISSN: 2178-5198

ISSN: 2178-5201

Editora da Universidade Estadual de Maringá - EDUEM

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Acta Scientiarum. Education, vol. 44, e53590, 2022, January-December
Editora da Universidade Estadual de Maringá - EDUEM

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4025/actascieduc.v44i1.53590>

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=303371539028>

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Early childhood education in Brasil: fighting for universalization, quality education, and teachers' training

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ABSTRACT. The objective of this text is to analyze the policies for early childhood education in Brazil, focusing on three political categories, namely universalization, the right to quality education, and teachers' qualification. The period covered by this study starts in 2006, which was the end of the 'decade of education', established by Law nº 9.494 (Guidelines and Bases for Education in Brazil) (1996). The methodology consists of a critical and contextualized documental analysis, based on the main law changes and official documents created for Early Childhood, to investigate advancements and setbacks. The results show that there is still a need for an education that prioritizes individuals' holistic development in early childhood, according to what is recommended by the Educational Program E2030 (Unesco, 2016), so that every child has the right to knowledge and education.

Keywords: educational policies; political categories; the Education 2030 agenda; pedagogical practices; educational work.

Educação infantil no Brasil: a luta pela universalização, direito à educação de qualidade e formação de professores

RESUMO. O objetivo do texto é analisar as políticas para a educação infantil no Brasil, com enfoque às categorias universalização, ao direito, à qualidade e à formação de professores. O recorte temporal se assenta a partir de 2006, período em que se encerrou a denominada 'década de educação' estabelecida na atual Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional, nº 9.494 (1996). A metodologia adotada concerne a uma análise documental crítica e contextualizada, com base nas principais mudanças legislativas e documentos oficiais produzidos para a educação infantil, a fim de cotejar os avanços e retrocessos manifestos nessa etapa educativa. Os resultados evidenciaram que permanece a necessidade de uma educação que priorize o desenvolvimento integral na primeira infância, conforme recomendação da Agenda Educacional E2030 (Unesco, 2016), para que todas as crianças tenham direito à aprendizagem e à formação pautada em um desenvolvimento infantil pleno.

Palavras-chave: políticas educacionais; categorias políticas; agenda educacional e2030; prática pedagógica; trabalho educativo.

Educación infantil en Brasil: la lucha por la universalización, derecho a la educación de calidad y formación de los profesores

RESUMEN. El objetivo del texto es analizar las políticas a la educación infantil en Brasil, con enfoque a las categorías universalización, derecho, calidad y formación de profesores. El recorte temporal se sienta a partir del año de 2006, período en que se enceró la denominada 'década de la educación' establecida en la Ley de Directrices y Bases de la Educación Nacional, nº 9.494 (1996). La metodología adoptada se centra en una análisis documental crítica y contextualizada, basada en los principales cambios legislativos y documentos oficiales producidos para la Educación Infantil, al fin de acechar los avances y retrocesos manifestados en esa etapa educativa. Los resultados evidenciaron qué permanece la necesidad de una educación que prioriza el desenvolvimiento integral en la primera infancia, conforme recomendación de la Agenda Educacional E2030 (Unesco, 2016), con el fin de que todos los niños tengan derecho a la aprendizaje y formación pautada en un desarrollo infantil pleno.

Palabras clave: políticas educativas; categorías políticas; agenda educativa e2030; práctica pedagógica; trabajo educativo.

Received on May 7, 2020.

Accepted on June 2, 2020.

Introduction

This article aims to analyze the current policies for early childhood education with regard to three political categories namely universalization, quality of basic education, and teachers' training in Brazil. It is a historical analysis that addresses the challenges of providing early childhood education serving all children, supported by effective and intersectoral policies aimed at universal access, quality, and adequate teachers' training. These aspects are essential for making sure that every child has the right to early childhood education and, therefore, overcome educational and social inequality.

To do so, this article presents an analytical mediation on the historical assumptions of early childhood education in Brazil. The time frame starts in 2006, that is, the end of the period called the 'decade of education', which was instituted by article 87 of the Law n° 9.394 (Guidelines and Bases for Education in Brazil) (1996). In this sense, the study highlights the advancements and setbacks in terms of policies for early childhood education in order to understand the process of struggle and confrontation faced during the construction of a policy aiming at universalization and quality for the aforementioned educational stage.

Finally, we reflect on the quality of education and its relationship with the training and pedagogical practice of teachers. This is a prominent topic since there have been new positions and roles played by underqualified people, who do not possess the skills required to educate and care for children in early childhood.

Considering the need to investigate the context of early childhood education to understand how educational policies are designed, it is necessary to analyze the contradictions in the process and the mechanisms engendered in the definitions for the corresponding policies that have been approved and put into practice since 2006. The analysis presented here is documentary and bibliographical for it investigates official, normative, and legal documents that contain the main policies for early childhood education within the period covered by the study. We also seek to understand the issue based on other secondary sources that address the history, policies, and pedagogical practice in Brazilian early childhood education.

By affirming the need to analyze contradictions in the policies for early childhood education, we emphasize the choice for what we name the 'contradiction' category in this research. Such category is a methodological instrument through which it is necessary to examine the propositions and mediations that suggest the economic, social, and, in this case, educational relationships, with emphasis on policies for early childhood education, bearing in mind that

In contradictions, there is a relationship between what is common to all phenomena and what is specific to each of them. The universal exists within the particular, and what leads us to distinguish one phenomenon from another is capturing what is common between a phenomenon and the others, and then noting what is specific about it, that is, what qualitatively differentiates it from other forms of movement (Cury, 1987, p. 32).

This research is relevant, as it intends to elucidate the process and mechanisms of construction and deconstruction of policies for early childhood education in Brazil. The topic and problems it addresses refer to the continuity and deepening of the investigations proposed by the research groups coordinated by the authors.

Early childhood education: a present past!

When analyzing the historical assumptions of early childhood education in Brazil, it is worth considering that the problems that still remain have historical roots in the past, after all, the flaws of the past still echo in the present (Kramer, 1987; Kuhlmann Jr., 1998; Moreira & Lara, 2012; Bogatschov & Moreira, 2006).

Early childhood education in Brazil, since colonization and from the very beginning, used to be based on compensatory rather than emancipatory models. Traditionally, educational institutions would be spaces meant to merely keep children, supply their most basic needs and replace family (Abramovay & Kramer, 1985). In other words, the greatest concern was merely providing needy children with assistance instead of implementing policies that could change positively their situation for good.

Bogatschov & Moreira (2006) corroborate this perception and emphasize that child care in Brazil began as a source of assistance, a sort of compensatory or preparatory care. Finally, it ended up becoming what it is today, that is, an educational concept. Another aspect is that there were very few specific initiatives in early childhood education from 1500 to 1874, as there are no records of formal education for children in this age group (Kramer, 1987).

From 1874 to 1899, some projects were developed by groups of physicians and public health workers to assist young children and, from 1899 to 1930, institutions were founded and laws were created to regulate

child care. It can be said that child care was redesigned from 1930 to 1980. The changes that took place in each historical period and the corresponding forms of child care were determined by different ways of understanding what a child is and to what extent society and the world of work see them as historical subjects (Kramer, 1987; Bogatschov & Moreira, 2006).

Understanding early education and childcare as two inseparable things is a recent achievement in the educational context in Brazil. In particular, since 1998, when the National Curricular Reference for Early Childhood Education (RCNEI) was created, we have been facing the challenge of understanding and defining the relationship between educating and caring in educational spaces, that is, daycare centers (0 to 3 years old) and kindergarten (04 and 05 years old).

In addition, the historically inherited characteristic of early childhood education as a sort of compensation has always been very present (Kramer, 1987; Oliveira, 2002). It has been three decades since the Ministry of Education and Municipal Education Systems became responsible for organizing and structuring early childhood education. We fight to enforce truly educational assistance to all children in this age group.

Within this context, begins the challenge of Municipal Education Systems, that is, making this educational stage a period for holistic development of young children, considering them as “[...] social and historical subjects who are part of a family organization within society, with their own cultural background, in a certain historical period” (Opinion CNE/CEB n° 22, 1998, p. 21).

Thus, children, as social subjects, are influenced by the environment they are surrounded by. Yet, they also act and leave marks in their historical time, as they are unique subjects who think, feel in their own ways, develop and learn by interacting with others, using various forms of expression to signify, re-signify, and create knowledge.

Therefore, early childhood education institutions must address education and care inextricably, because, from an early age, children are already active subjects, and they learn through relationships and interactions. Bogatschov & Moreira (2006, p. 9) state that

[...] caring for someone involves understanding how to help them evolve, which means helping them develop capacities. It comprises affection and special attention to individuals’ biological needs. All in all, it appears that the concept of care goes beyond biological aspects.

It is important to highlight that Law n° 11,274 (2006), created at the end of the education decade, made it mandatory for 6-year-old children to attend elementary school. School admission of children in this age group is a great concern due to the growing number of individuals who start elementary school too early. This is a consequence of the lack of a properly defined age-cut policy in some Brazilian states.

Another problem is the fact that, according to data from the National Literacy Assessment (2014)¹, one in five eight-year-olds are not literate and can only read sentences (Moreno & Rodrigues, 2015). In 2016, the results were not different from that, since more than 50% of the third-year elementary school students had a poor performance on reading and maths examinations. The percentage of children who could not read sufficiently well was 56.17% in 2014, and 54.73% in 2016 (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira [INEP], 2017).

Based on the results of the National Literacy Assessment [ANA] (2013), Amarante & Moreira (2019) emphasize that more than half of the third-year elementary school students are not sufficiently good at reading and maths. As a result, early childhood education is seen merely as a preparatory stage with an early emphasis on literacy. According to the authors,

In view of the results of this assessment tool, it appears that the social right to be literate is being unsuccessfully offered to children. The right to education, ensured by Art. 205 of the Federal Constitution, goes beyond knowledge and school learning. Instead, it must encompass the holistic development of individuals who live and interact in a society that is driven by constant historical and social transformations (Amarante & Moreira, 2019, p. 5).

One decade after the changes in the Brazilian basic education system, sending 6-year-old children to elementary schools rather than early childhood institutions has not proven to be beneficial, as school failure prevails. In addition, the argument that children aged six would have more time to socialize within the literacy process does not seem to have ensured the right to develop literacy-related knowledge and skills.

Thus, when addressing the challenges of early childhood education in Brazil, we face a controversial issue, which is related to age groups. We question the early age at which children start attending elementary school, as well as the fact that the formative practices in early childhood education focus merely on preparing those children for elementary school, with no connection with the real concept of what holistic development in

early childhood education is. Earlier and earlier, we discourage learning through playing, ludic experiences, fantasy, creativity, and art with its different languages. All of this has been replaced by the excessive systematization of school practices, with printable activities done in spaces that do not suit learning, under the responsibility of untrained or underqualified professionals, not to mention premature standardized assessments. The Constitutional Amendment n° 59 (2009) regulated the compulsory enrollment of 4-year-old children in basic education, which has had implications for teacher training policies.

The challenge of universalization in early childhood education

Early childhood education as a universal right is something very recent in the history of Brazilian education. Not until the 1998 Federal Constitution were children considered subjects who have rights, including the right to education, which was reaffirmed as fundamental by the Child and Adolescent Statute (law n° 8069/1990). According to Victor (2011, p. 118), “the State is responsible for creating public policies aimed at universalizing quality access to daycare centers and kindergarten.”

Originally, the 1988 Constitution asserts that the State must “[...] guarantee that zero to six-year-old children have access to daycare and kindergarten” (Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil, 1988, art. 208, IV, p. 138). However, the constitutional text does not clearly state who is responsible for this stage of basic education. It only says that municipalities are responsible for early childhood and elementary education. In light of the foregoing, it is noticed that the Brazilian collaborative organization of education systems is only concerned with the preschool level, which is under the responsibility of municipalities. In other words, the system seems not to be committed to zero to three-year-old children. Therefore, daycare centers do not count on qualified professionals capable of ensuring that children will have their right to education respected.

Due to law n° 9.494 (Guidelines and Bases for Education in Brazil), created in 1996, early childhood education became the first stage of basic education (art.29). The law also determined that daycare centers and kindergartens should be integrated into the education system (art.89). As pointed out by Kramer (2006, p. 20), “all these documents are achievements of social and daycare movements, as well as the movements of permanent early childhood education forums [...]” which fight for accessible service.

Although early childhood education has been legally recognized as a right, the special attention to elementary education paid by the Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Elementary Education and the Valorization of Teaching [FUNDEF]¹ has reduced the financial resources necessary to provide quality early childhood education services.

Since most of the resources started to be invested in elementary education, most municipalities began to have difficulties in assisting young children. There is, therefore, an evident contradiction. On the one hand, early childhood education is legally recognized as the first stage of basic education, but, on the other, there are not sufficient resources to ensure this right.

From that moment on, the fight for early childhood education changes its scope from legal to political-pedagogical. There is a need for political actions capable of guaranteeing what is stated by the law. That being said, some guiding documents were created, such as the National Curricular Reference for Early Childhood Education [RCNEI] and the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (Opinion CNE/CEB n° 22, 1998; Normative Act CEB n° 1, 1999).

In addition, more investments and the inclusion of early childhood education in FUNDEF started to be demanded. For that reason, goal n° 21 for early childhood education of the 2021 National Education Plan (Law n° 10.172, 2001) determined that “in addition to other municipal investments, 10% of the resources for the maintenance and development of education not linked to FUNDEF should be invested in early childhood education as a priority” (Law n° 10.172, 2001, p. 14). The aim was to assist, by the end of the decade, 50% of all the children aged zero to three, and 80% of the children aged four to six years. Some goals of the National Education Plan (2001-2010) were not achieved because of nine presidential vetoes, which prevented the amount of public spending (considering the GDP) on education from increasing, so that it could reach, at least, 7%. The resources should be increased “[...] annually, at the rate of 0.5% of the GDP, in the first four years of the Plan and 0.6% in the fifth year”

In 2005, law n° 11,114 made the enrollment of six-year-old children in elementary school mandatory. The following year, law n° 11.274 (2006) determined that elementary education should last nine years (instead of

¹ FUNDEF was created by Constitutional Amendment No. 14, on September 12, 1996 (1996), and regulated by Law No. 9.424 (1996).

eight), and that children should be enrolled at the age of six. The law also determined that these changes would have to be implemented by 2010. Also in 2006, through Constitutional Amendment n° 53, the Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Basic Education and the Valorization of Education Professionals (FUNDEB, Law n° 11.494) was created to replace FUNDEF. This new funding program started to assist the entire basic education system and was implemented gradually, within three years, for both early childhood and high school education.

In a broad sense, Constitutional Amendment n° 59 (2009) made substantial changes regarding the right to early childhood education. Unprecedentedly, part of early childhood education (preschool phase) became compulsory and a subjective public right. Cury (2002) states what this type of right means:

A subjective public right is one that can be directly and immediately demanded from the State. The person entitled to this right can be anyone, at any age, who has not had access to compulsory education [...]. It is a subjective right because its holder is a subject with a prerogative that is essential to their personality and citizenship. And it is called public because, in this case, it is a legal rule that regulates the competence, obligations, and fundamental interests of public authorities, explaining to what extent citizens can make use of public services. Regarding education, ensuring one's subjective public right is a duty of the sphere of government responsible for the education service in question (Cury, 2002, p. 21).

Constitutional Amendment n° 59 (2009) made schooling compulsory for children/adolescents aged four to 17. It also determined that this change should be gradually implemented, with technical and financial support from the Federal Government, by 2016. Therefore, not assisting this age group may lead authorities to be held accountable. When it comes to early childhood education (4 to 5 years old), the authorities are municipalities' leaders. In addition, parents must enroll their children at the age of four (Law n° 9.394, 1996, art.6°), running the risk of being held accountable if they do not.

As previously mentioned, early admission of children in elementary schools has been on the scene at different times in the country, as it has been part of other political strategies. Besides resulting in significant changes in the way young children are educated, this age group change has caused problems related to coexistence, not to mention changes in terms of pedagogical organization. Kramer (2007), in a document organized by the Ministry of Education, entitled "Nine-year elementary education: guidelines for the inclusion of six-year-old children", asserts that

A child is not just someone who is not an adult. Instead, every child is someone who will become an adult. We must recognize specific characteristics of childhood, that is, the power of imagination, fantasy, creation, and playing as a cultural experience. Children are citizens, people with rights, who produce culture and are produced within it. This way of seeing children favors understanding them and also seeing the world from their own point of view. Childhood, more than a stage, is a category of history. If there is such a thing called human history, that is because men were children one day. Children play, and this is what makes them who they are (Kramer, 2007, p. 15).

It is important to highlight that daycare, which is part of early childhood education, was not considered a mandatory stage of education. This is true despite the new National Education Plan (2014-2024), implemented by Law n° 13.005 (2014, p. 3), whose goal n° 1 comprises "[...] expand daycare service in a way to assist, at least, 50% of all children up to three years old by the end of the validity period of this document." The Continuous Annual Household Sample Survey (PNAD, 2018) shows that, in 2018, the enrollment rate of children from zero to three years old was 34.2%. As for children from four to five years, which corresponds to the preschool level, it was 92.4%.

Given the above, it is evident that universalizing early childhood education, even within the legal framework, is still a great challenge. It is also evident that social movements for the right to early childhood education need to fight harder, since, in addition to just guaranteeing access, it is necessary to ensure quality. The debates in favor of the right to early childhood education at the National Education Conference (Conae, 2010, 2014) were intense. Regarding the bases for democratic access, children's permanence, and the success of education (in early childhood education in particular), the following excerpt of the 2010 Conae Final Document stands out, for it stresses

a) The consolidation of policies, guidelines, and actions to expand access to early childhood education, aiming to guarantee the right to quality education for children from 0 to 5 years of age. This is because, considering mandatory enrollment from the age of four, Brazil cannot run the risk of failing to prioritize increasing enrollment in the daycare centers in favor of expanding enrollment in preschool. Early childhood education cannot be split into two. [...]

b) The guarantee of financial support from the Federal Government for the construction and renovation of schools, as well as staff funding, in order to increase the number of vacancies by 50% by 2010 and universalize the service, so that the demand can be met by 2016, specifically regarding full-time enrollment of zero to three-year-old children, at the discretion of their families, progressively ensuring they will be taken care of by qualified professionals in constant training (Conae, 2010, p. 68).

The 2010 Conae should have been a reference for the elaboration of the National Education Plan. However, this was not the case when it comes to early childhood education. As shown by the excerpt above, aiming to universalize early childhood education services, the 2014 Conae proposed the universalization of early childhood education in preschool for children from four to five years by 2016, and the expansion of early childhood education in daycare centers, so as to meet 100% of the demand of children up to three years old by the end of the period covered by the National Education Plan (Conae, 2014).

Organized civil society (represented by entities), associations, and, in particular, the Inter-Forum Movement of Early Childhood Education in Brazil [MIEIB]² actively participated in this process of claiming the guarantee of early childhood education. MIEIB has been an important social movement in the creation and monitoring of policies for early childhood education. It also defends that infants, very young children, and small children must have their right to early childhood education respected and ensured through “[...] public policies capable of providing public, secular, inclusive and quality free Early Childhood Education” (MIEIB, 2018, p. 4).

Regarding the current international recommendations for early childhood education, in order to understand the political aspects of this educational stage, it is necessary to consider the international cooperation configured by the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda (2015 to 2030), created by the countries that compose the United Nations [UN]. Brazil agreed to put it into practice with regard to education, based on the definitions contained in the Sustainable Development Goal n° 4 (SDG4).

Moreira (2019), when analyzing the aspects that outline national policies in view of the mechanisms of transnational regulation through international cooperation, reveals the main policy categories recommended for early childhood education in the international documents of the E2030 Agenda: the Incheon Declaration and the Education Framework for Action aiming to implement the Sustainable Development Goal n° 4 (Unesco, 2016), and the Buenos Aires Declaration (Unesco, 2017), as shown in Table 1.

The main political categories recommended for designing educational policies in Latin American and Caribbean countries, with regard to early childhood education for the next 15 years, are: focusing on poor citizens who are victims of social exclusion; defending early childhood education as a stage to prepare individuals for elementary education and upcoming stages; assistance and care provided not only by the State but also by the third sector; partnerships with multisectoral and intersectoral groups. We can infer that teachers are not a great concern in early childhood education, for the word “teacher” is not even used in the text. Instead, these professionals are referred to as “personnel”. There are also no recommendations in terms of making early childhood education mandatory and universal (Moreira, 2019).

Amongst the incoherent international recommendations made by the E2030 Agenda, and in a turbulent political context, the III National Education Conference (Conae) took place in 2018. Regarding Early Childhood Education, the event emphasized the importance of the cooperation policy involving the Federal, state, and municipal governments to guarantee its universalization. In this sense, the Final Document of the Conference states that “[...] it is up to the entities of the federation: [...] II – to guarantee universal enrollment in daycare centers of children from 0 (zero) to 3 (three) years, according to the demand” (Conae, 2018, p. 44). The text emphasizes the first stage of childhood education because enrollment in preschool (second stage) had become compulsory.

Another important event took place in 2018. It was the National Popular Education Conference (Conape, 2018), which was organized by the National Popular Education Forum [FNPE]. The Forum is made possible through “[...] a collective process of articulation among 35 civil society entities that defend public and democratic education” (Conape, 2018, p. 3). With regard to Early Childhood Education, in addition to ensuring the universalization and quality of compulsory education, the recommendations made by the members of the forum were “[...] to ensure universal enrollment of zero to three-year-old children in daycare centers, according to the demand, with no loss in terms of investments in the already consolidated system” (Conape, 2018, p. 7). In order to ensure the implementation of these propositions, the members declared that overturning Constitutional Amendment n° 95 (2016) was crucial, for it was created to freeze and reduce the investments in social policies for 20 years.

² It is important to highlight that the Inter-Forum of Early Childhood Education in Brazil (MIEIB, 2020, p. 1) “[...] was born in 1999 as a national movement in defense of Early Childhood Education, when members of Early Childhood Education Forums active in some states discussed the need to unite in defending the rights of children from zero to six years old to quality Early Childhood Education. It was all about proposing a type of dynamic and active organization, which would enhance the performance of different forums, joining efforts and projecting consensual positions at the Brazilian national level. It was a movement idealized to respect the autonomy of each forum, articulating them based on a common agenda.

Table 1. Political categories for early childhood education in the E2030 Agenda.

the Incheon Declaration and the Education Framework for Action, aiming to implement the Sustainable Development Goal nº 4 (Unesco, 2016)		
Category	Statement	Page
Lack of universalization Inclusion Quality Focus on poverty Assessment	Put in place integrated and inclusive policies and legislation that guarantee the provision of at least one year of free and compulsory quality pre-primary education, paying special attention to reaching the poorest and most disadvantaged children through ECCE services ³ . This includes assessment of ECCE policies and programmes in order to improve their quality .	39
Multisectoriality and Intersectoriality	Put in place integrated multisector ECCE policies and strategies, supported by coordination among ministries responsible for nutrition, health, social and child protection, water/sanitation, justice and education, and secure adequate resources for implementation .	39
Personnel professionalization Absence of the word “teacher”	Devise clear policies, strategies and action plans for the professionalization of ECCE personnel by enhancing and monitoring their ongoing professional development, status and working conditions.	39
Quality Inclusion	Design and implement inclusive , accessible and integrated programmes, services and infrastructure of quality for early childhood, covering health, nutrition, protection and education needs, especially for children with disabilities, and support families as children’s first caregivers.	39 e 40
Buenos Aires Declaration (2017)		
Category	Statement	Page
Preparatory stage	By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care services, and pre-school education so that they are ready for primary education.	6
Focus on poverty Quality Partnerships	We reaffirm our commitment to continue advancing in the expansion of early childhood care and education programs, prioritizing marginalized and/or excluded groups , based on a quality offer that promotes the comprehensive development of boys and girls, with the active participation of families and communities, in interinstitutional and intersectoral articulation, thus, ensuring school success in successive cycles.	8
Intersectoriality		

Source: Devised by the authors, based on Moreira (2019) (highlights by the authors)

As for the National Curricular Common Base [BNCC] (2018), its approval was discussed at both Conae (2018) and Conape (2018), although from different perspectives. The former addressed the implementation of the curricular common base as a necessary measure to improve the quality of basic education in all stages, which includes early childhood education. The latter, in turn, was against it, based on the idea that it standardizes teaching in a negative way and homogenizes the curriculum by ruling out social topics that are pivotal for a country that wishes to have holistically educated citizens.

Faced with these impasses, the education system started going through the process of implementing the BNCC in early childhood education, which, according to the CNE/CP Normative Act No. 2 (2017), had to happen by the beginning of the 2020 school year⁴.

³ The acronym refers to Early Childhood Care and Education. The emphasis expressed in the educational policy for ECCE recommended in the E2030 Agenda is designed to be “[...] the basis for children’s long-term development, as well as their health and well-being. ECCE builds the competencies and skills that enable people to learn throughout their lives and earn their livelihoods. Investments in young children, particularly those from marginalized groups, have the greatest long-term impacts in terms of educational and developmental outcomes” (Unesco, 2016, p. 14).

⁴ Currently, the world is going through a health crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has led countries to follow the World Health Organization’s (WHO) recommendations. With regard to Brazilian education, the curricular educational reforms underway in the education systems were paralyzed to meet the emergency reforms triggered by the necessary social isolation to contain the proliferation of the virus in the country. The 2020 school year is still under debate regarding the reorganization of the calendar and the possibility of calculating

Pedagogical practice and teachers who teach in early childhood education

An essential aspect to be addressed by policies for early childhood education is the role played by teachers, as well as their training. We believe that early childhood education needs teachers as qualified as in any other stage of education, because, in addition to caring for their students, they also make knowledge accessible to them. This means defending not only early childhood education teachers, but also the concept of childhood itself, since learning is not something natural or spontaneous. It is rather a process that involves mediation and needs to be intentionally organized by skilled professionals.

Knowing children's process of full development and the appropriate ways to conduct it in educational work is a constant challenge faced by continuing teacher education, as well as the organization and adequate planning of the experiences of plastic, practical and recreational activities. However, it should be done without making early childhood education similar to later education stages, since "[...] young children do not learn in the same way as adults" (Mello, 2015, p. 8), which requires appropriate pedagogical training.

Educational work in early childhood education is organized based on who children are, as well as their needs and specificities. Caring and teaching are processes that go hand in hand, and both are essential for quality education, that is, an education that respects children's right to knowledge as a "driver of child development" (Arce, 2010, p.31).

The binary debate on 'caring-educating', raised by policies for early childhood education, represents a polarized perspective that contributes little to understanding the specific demands of early childhood education, since "[...] it focuses on the apparent operational dimensions of these phenomena and is not concerned with clarifying how to educate – and care for – children in early childhood education institutions, as well as why to do that", after all, "[...] care and education are intrinsically connected dimensions, perhaps inseparable from the point of view of pedagogical praxis" (Pasqualini & Martins, 2008, p. 77).

Too much discussion around educating-caring or caring-educating as a dichotomy is a way of disqualifying the real purpose of early childhood education. Thinking about educational work with young children requires a pedagogical structure, based on the scientific understanding of institutions (Martins & Arce, 2010) and on a political pedagogical project that should work as a real instrument for a truly democratic early childhood education, built by a collective work:

Thus, actions that promote greater horizontality in work relationships at school contribute to the increase in the very nature of school work. In other words, the more horizontally the education system manages to operate, the more collective it becomes, and, the more collective, the more it plays its role and promotes communicative action. Consequently, its quality increases (Souza, 2019, p. 279).

We support the idea that it is in a democratic school environment that we can help individuals develop their abilities to the fullest, be they physical, social, or psychological. This is possible by taking possession of knowledge historically accumulated by humankind, in a process where "[...] pedagogical intervention is an agent of the resources available to children, and challenges are imposed to both make their limits explicit and drive them to search for more sophisticated psychic resources, including thinking, language, memory, and attention" (Dickel & Sartori, 2020, p. 11). The authors emphasize that it is necessary to be aware of the fact that "[...] educational intervention is a sort of help children receive in their constructive process, which adjusts to this process, enabling them to make some progress in relation to it (Dickel & Sartori, 2020, p. 12). Therefore, one cannot deny the importance of teachers' essential role and qualified training. It is up to teachers to intentionally promote situations that trigger learning and promote teaching experiences.

Martins & Arce (2010, p. 11) call our attention to the need to reverse the "[...] evaluative emptying of schools' purpose, the act of teaching and teachers' work". In this sense, the authors emphasize that teachers must

[...] be politically and pedagogically committed to fair, high-quality early childhood education for all, as well as aim at systematic education as the articulating axis of the activities they carry out. With no fear, let us assume early childhood education as an expression of the right of young children to their full development and of teachers' right to the effective exercise of their professional duty (Martins & Arce, 2010, p. 11).

The process of acknowledging children as subjects and guaranteeing their right to early childhood education has been a long way in history. The subjects involved in this process, that is, children and teachers, need favorable objective conditions and, in this regard, we are far from the ideal scenario. We emphasize the

need for adequate investments and programs that provide teachers with quality training, so that they can accomplish their mission in the best way, enhancing full child development.

Final considerations

By analyzing historical and political aspects involved in universalization, the right to quality education, and teacher training, we can see that there is an urgent need for early childhood education as an educational stage that prioritizes the full development of young children. It must be a stage that is truly responsible for the transmission/assimilation of systematized knowledge, so that all children can have the right to learn, through a process of humanization, building a human heritage.

Due to a huge crisis and a series of setbacks that started in 2015, and after management changes in the Ministry of Education (MEC) during the provisional government of former President Michel Temer, we have been facing reforms imposed by conservative political mechanisms, defined by partisan and corrupt conducts, driven by repression and the interests of powerful businessmen. This scenario, which is not something new in the history of the country, represents ways of establishing a process of the cyclical crisis of capital, whose aim is to dismantle public education, preventing children from having their right to education respected and, consequently, increase social and educational inequality. It is a kind of policy that favors the new frontier between public and private in several ways (Peroni, Oliveira, & Fernandes, 2009).

It is necessary and urgent to fight for effective policies actually capable of ensuring universalization and democratization of early childhood education, quality of education, and adequate training of teachers and education-related professionals. These are essential aspects for overcoming educational and social inequalities.

It is urgent to educate and care for all children as historical subjects, who are aware of their reality and able to produce knowledge. However, we know that the challenges faced by early childhood education are strengthened by capital contradictions and the international political premises announced in the E2030 Agenda, which emphasizes competencies, skills, and early childhood care in early childhood education institutions seen as preparatory steps for poverty reduction. New political clashes and confrontations arise, and we need to be strong in order to avoid historical setbacks through intense mobilization of social movements and educational segments.

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NOTE: The authors were jointly responsible for analyzing and interpreting the data, writing the manuscript, and approving the final version to be published.