

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: HISTORY, QUALIFICATION AND CHALLENGES

FONSECA, André Dionei (Brazil, Pará, Santarém)^{1*}
COLARES, Anselmo Alencar (Brazil, Pará, Santarém)^{1}**
COSTA, Sinara Almeida da (Brazil, Pará, Santarém)^{1*}**

¹Federal University of Western Pará

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0220-5117>^{*}

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1767-5640>^{**}

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2605-4192>^{***}

ABSTRACT

Considering that the historical analytical exercise is essential to understand and overcome the obstacles that hinder the development of public policies focused on the improvement of Early Childhood Education in Brazil, in this theoretical article we intend to present some historical elements about the different origins of nurseries and preschools, and to discuss the roles assumed by the Early Childhood Education teachers throughout the centuries. Finally, we aim to identify what are the challenges to be faced in teacher qualification nowadays. We argue that the improvement in the educational services provided to young children relies on committing to quality teacher training, along with raising awareness about the importance of the Brazilian government prioritizing education in its fiscal policy, especially children's education.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood. Education. Teaching. Qualification.

EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL: HISTÓRIA, FORMAÇÃO E DESAFIOS

RESUMO

Considerando que o exercício analítico histórico é essencial na compreensão das barreiras que travam o desenvolvimento das políticas públicas voltadas à melhoria da Educação Infantil no Brasil, propõe-se, neste artigo de caráter teórico, apresentar alguns elementos históricos sobre as origens distintas das creches e pré-escolas, discutir os papéis assumidos pelos professores de Educação Infantil ao longo dos séculos e, por fim, identificar quais são os desafios a serem enfrentados na formação docente nos dias atuais. Defende-se que a melhoria na qualidade dos serviços de educação oferecidos às crianças pequenas depende do comprometimento com uma formação de qualidade de seus professores, mas também de uma ampla conscientização da sociedade sobre a importância de o Estado brasileiro priorizar a educação, especialmente a infantil, em sua política orçamentária.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Educação Infantil. Docência. Formação.

EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL: HISTORIA, CAPACITACIÓN Y DESAFÍOS

RESUMEN

Considerando que el ejercicio analítico histórico es esencial en la comprensión de las barreras que frenan el desarrollo de las políticas públicas orientadas a la mejora de la Educación Infantil en Brasil, se propone, en este artículo teórico, presentar algunos elementos históricos sobre los orígenes distintos de las guarderías y de las unidades preescolares, discutir los papeles asumidos por los profesores de Educación Infantil a lo largo de los siglos y, por último, identificar cuáles son los desafíos a ser enfrentados en la formación docente en los días actuales. Se defiende que la mejora en la calidad de los servicios de educación ofrecidos a los niños pequeños depende del compromiso con una formación de calidad de sus profesores, pero también de una amplia concientización de la sociedad sobre la importancia de que el Estado brasileño priorice la educación, especialmente la infantil, en su política presupuestaria.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Educación Infantil. Enseñanza. Capacitación.

1 INTRODUCTION

The results of the 2018 School Census showed concerning data about Early Childhood Education in Brazil. A summary of the statistics, for example, reports that there was a reduction in the number of preschools, from 106,204 units in 2016 to 105,200 in 2017, and in the number of Early Childhood Education schools, from 117,191 units in 2016 to 116,472 in 2017. Concerning nurseries, what could be an encouraging element, since there was an increase in the number of units (from 65,249 in 2016 to 67,902 in 2017), was frustrated by data related to their infrastructure, because of the precariousness in which these spaces of support to early childhood function.

The reality described by these numbers, 30 years after the implementation of the Citizen's Constitution, whose primary objective was to establish a social and fiscal pact in order to guarantee funding for education in all levels, shows how the Brazilian government has strayed from the responsibilities stated in the Constitution (CAMARA, 2013), a scenario that becomes even more critical if we take into consideration the macroeconomic restrictive measures, especially those approved after Michel Temer became president, in 2016, and which the current administration is trying to strengthen. The New Tax System (NRF, in Portuguese), which, through Constitutional Amendment N.

95, conditions the growth of primary spending to the limits of the previous year's inflationary indices, is an exclamatory example of an attack against the Brazilian government's financing power, hindering the correction of historical distortions, such as those expressed in the 2018 Educational Census. And since Early Childhood Education, due to a historical lack of funding, is the educational level with the greatest deficiency, there is certainly no place for an optimistic view of this new fiscal model, which privileges paying taxes, onuses and the amortization of the so-called "public debt", to the detriment of essential public services.

Those facts highlight the need for a historical discussion that enables the reflection about the reasons why such a strategic and sensitive sector as Early Childhood Education has been neglected by the Brazilian government for decades and even now, although it has a recognized place in Basic Education, still depends on funding methods which are far from ideal (MACÊDO; DIAS, 2011).

The National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (LDB, in Portuguese) (BRASIL, 1996) is emphatic when it states, in article 29, the purpose of Early Childhood Education as "[...] integral development of the child until the age of 5, in physical, psychological, intellectual and social aspects, completing the actions of family and community" (our translation). The National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education have the following understanding on Early Childhood Education:

First stage of Basic Education, provided in nurseries and preschools, which are characterized as non-domestic institutional spaces constituting public or private education establishments that educate and care for children from 0 to 5 years of age during the day, full-time or part-time, regulated and overseen by the competent branch of the educational system and submitted to social control. It is the government's responsibility to provide free public Early Childhood Education with quality, without entrance exams. (BRASIL, 2010, p. 12).

That determination, however, isn't enough to specifically establish the identity of this first stage of Basic Education, a complex task which involves the participation of many subjects, including teachers and children. This distinction is even more severe if we recall the distinct origins of the two stages that constitute it. Considering that the historical analytical exercise is essential to understand and overcome the obstacles that hinder the development of public policies focused on the improvement of Early Childhood Education in Brazil, in this theoretical article we intend to present

some historical elements about the different origins of nurseries and preschools, and to discuss the roles assumed by the Early Childhood Education teachers throughout the centuries. Finally, we aim to identify the challenges to be faced in teacher qualification nowadays.

2 NURSERIES AND PRESCHOOLS: TWO ORIGINS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A REALITY

Early Childhood Education is an issue with deep historical roots. Celia Lascarides and Hinitz Blythe (2000) indicate, for example, that in Ancient societies, such as Greece and Rome, Early Childhood Education was an important sociopolitical aspect, because, since family was the primary unit in their social and economic organization, political life was an extension of the family into the public domain; hence the attention to education in the first years of a child's life, who learned from tutors rudimentary knowledge about social life, language, psychomotor discipline, among others.

In the Medieval Period, the authors note, the lack of resources that afflicted the majority of the population limited early education to children from the upper class, who were educated at home by the father or a private teacher since age five or six (LASCARIDES; BLYTHE, 2000, p. 31). Collective spaces, like nurseries, in the Modern Age, originated in connection with children's asylums, whose main purpose was to mediate a largely precarious situation through the fulfillment of the children's immediate needs, such as food, clothes and shelter. According to Kuhlmann Jr. (1998), nurseries for children from age zero to three were the alternative to stop mothers from abandoning their children, a common attitude in the 17th and 18th centuries, especially due to the extreme poverty of large part of the population.

Also according to Kuhlmann Jr. (1998), one of the primary characteristics of public assistance education was the low quality of service as a goal, an education more focused on morals than intellect, so that children wouldn't think too much about their own reality and were resigned to their social condition¹. Another particularity was isolating the child from possible infectious disease contamination means, with the street as the main

¹ It is important to note that Kuhlmann (1998) acknowledges some specificities, because in public assistance education there were educational proposals.

one. This action was considered a pedagogical virtue and, therefore, educational assistance for children started to be seen as a favor toward the poor, and the frequent low quality, to be accepted as something natural.

Preschools, on the other hand, had a different origin. It was in 1848 Germany, with the kindergartens of Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852), that the first experiences with this particular kind of space took place. At the kindergartens, the children – considered as little seeds that, if cared for and exposed to favorable conditions in their environment, would bloom in a climate of love and affection – would be free to learn about themselves and the world. These institutions gave more attention to the cognitive and didn't only prioritize care, but considered the child development as a whole. Initially, this service was also aimed at the working class, but it was quickly appropriated by the bourgeoisie, who realized the advantages a good education would grant their children.

According to Kuhlmann Jr. (1998), in the beginning of the 20th century, the preschool institutions spread internationally as part of a group of measures that constituted a new assistance concept, scientific assistance, encompassing aspects such as food and housing for workers and poor people, with the postulation as its defining mark, understood as a modern and scientific proposal. The circulation of cultural deprivation theories in the 1970s supported the origin of compensatory education, which aimed, as suggested by its very name, to compensate supposed insufficiencies that poor children might have. This educational theory was deeply criticized by educators, since the overvaluation of assistance measures would result in the deterioration of teachers' salaries and a decrease in education funding. The low quality of education was blamed on a perceived "excess" of attention toward nutrition, to the detriment of educational aspects. In this context, education started to be considered the opposite of public assistance.

Still in accordance with Kuhlmann Jr. (2005), the distance between assistance and education opposes the function of guard to the function of education, as though they were incompatible. It is important to emphasize, however, that nurseries didn't have a strictly assistance function, but were also, in a broad sense, educational. Likewise, kindergartens weren't exclusively pedagogical. According to that author, the fields of education and assistance were and still are present in both cases, and these parallel

trajectories found many communication channels throughout their history. The nursery concept, however, still recalls ideas and feelings of institutions related only to physical care, such as hygiene and nutrition, which serve the working class full-time and has assistance functions. But preschools recall thoughts and feelings related to an institution with educational purpose, serving upper classes part-time and aiming to prepare the child for Elementary School.

According to Zabalza (1998), children's school, besides challenges common to the entire educational system, has challenges specific to this field, such as reinforcing its own identity and formative autonomy, and reinforcing its bonds with the environment and Elementary School, which must be seen as a stage of curriculum continuity. In Brazil, the increase in the number of studies about children and education (ROCHA, 1999), as well as the creation and actions of an Early Childhood Coordination, connected to MEC (the Ministry of Education), and the incorporation of Early Childhood Education into the educational system are current examples of how society has sought to overcome these challenges. These measures also corroborate the acknowledgement and construction of a new identity in the stage of social practice that is Early Childhood Education.

It is important to highlight that, according to Silva and Rossetti-Ferreira (2006), these advances are expressions of many others that had been happening in the field of knowledge about young children. An important mark of that fight is in the discussions that permeated society in the context of the Constituent Assembly in the 1980s, when several social forces pressured their representatives toward acknowledging Early Childhood Education as a constitutional right. Afterwards, according to Oliveira (1994), the conferences of the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in Education (Anped, in Portuguese), since 1995, supported proposals presented and approved in the Constitution. Hence the crucial importance of the participation of civil society in consolidating the inherent identity of Early Childhood Education, which has become increasingly clearer and more tangible.

3 THE ROLES OCCUPIED BY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHERS ALONG THE CENTURIES

As seen in the previous section, generally, Early Childhood Education institutions, along their history, underwent several transformations, and the education of young children had, and still has, many functions throughout the centuries, such as custody, protection, nutrition and the fulfillment of supposed needs that poor children might have. According to Lascares and Blythe (2000, p. 24), in western patriarchal societies, the historical evidence about childhood suggest that primary responsibility for children (from birth until seven years of age) has fallen exclusively to women. With the institutionalization of specific Early Childhood Education spaces, since the 18th century, in Europe, the image of the female teacher as main professional in this new teaching locus was consolidated in the course of centuries. Common understanding about Early Childhood Education as an institution allows a glimpse into what is or what should be the teacher's role, influenced by what that professional thinks about nurseries, preschools, and the population served by these institutions.

There have been many titles, as well as functions, bestowed on Early Childhood Education teachers throughout the centuries: nurse, counsellor, monitor, master, auntie, among others. Such designations are intrinsically linked to the objectives of Early Childhood Education in certain historical moments. In their origin, nurseries were considered a modality of charity and, given the characteristics inherent to that type of entity, the activities carried out in them also showed an aspect of lay volunteer work, depending more on idealism and the good will of those involved than on specific professional training (CAMPOS et al., 1991). This point of view made it difficult for nurses, professionals who worked directly with the children, to demand better wages and work conditions, since that attitude would have a negative connotation, as it contrasted with the image of charity and benefit associated to the kind of service aimed at the poor population.

The diversification of service proposals, whose premise was cost reduction, introduced a new category of workers who acted directly with the children: the monitor, who didn't have specialized training and worked with large groups following irregularly close orientation of teachers or technicians. According to Campos et al. (1991), the

particularities of service toward young children, especially in nurseries, has contributed negatively for the construction of a professional identity of the people responsible for the children in these institutions. Among those particularities, we find: “1. perform, integrated to the educational action, the function of guaranteeing, during part of the day, the student’s survival; 2. working with the youngest student population” (CAMPOS et al., 1991, p. 48, our translation). Therefore, the fact that many activities carried out in nurseries imply a somewhat physical interaction hinders the perception of nurseries as educational institutions (these would be restricted to activities closer to the model of schools) and contributes to demote them to the domestic sphere, which leads to professional devaluation.

Campos et al. (1991) also highlights the fact that these particularities in working with young children interfere with the hierarchy of jobs and functions within educational institutions. According to the author, there are at least three kinds of factors involved in that relationship:

- direct activity with the student (the more directly connected to the student, the lower the status of the professional is);
- student’s age (the younger the student, the lower the status of the professional is);
- proximity to the body (the more immediately connected to survival – and therefore, the body – of the student, the lower the status of the professional is). (CAMPOS et al., 1991, p. 49, our translation).

These reflections can help us to understand some work situations experienced by professionals of this educational stage that are still present today both within one institution and in confrontation with others. One example is the wage difference between teachers in Early Childhood Education and those in other stages of basic education, or between teachers who work in nurseries and teachers who work in preschools. With the origin of kindergartens, in 1848 Germany, we have another person responsible for children: the kindergarten teacher. This person should focus her work on the children’s interests and needs, treating them lovingly and kindly, but without interfering in their growth. Kindergarten teachers had work guides, manuals, also aimed at mothers, which mixed seeds of a developmental psychology and religion. Thus, Fröebel started to define this woman not as a professional, but as a “half-mother”, who knew the children’s interests and needs, but had essentially a “mother’s heart” guiding her actions (ARCE, 2001).

For Montessori, Fröebel's disciple in the beginning of the 20th century, developmental psychology would provide the necessary scientific background in order for that woman to be elevated from a kindergarten teacher to a master; however, that master would have a secondary role in the teaching-learning process, having the main function of organizing environmental conditions for the child to act autonomously.

Within the perspective of compensatory education in Brazil in the end of the 20th century, in which poor children's needs should be fulfilled through their preparation for literacy, the attitude demanded of the person that would be responsible for their education in preschools also changed. Since then, the teacher's actions gained a more formal "teaching" aspect, as transmitter of knowledge. This role is similar to that of the "auntie", still disseminated nowadays in Early Childhood Education institutions, showing a lack of definition of the professional who works with young children. According to Arce (2001, p. 174, our translation):

[...] this woman/mother isn't really a teacher due to the extreme proximity of her work to the domestic and private [...] and, on the other hand, she isn't really a mother, because, biologically, she wasn't responsible for all those children who are under her care.

Kramer (2005) highlights the fact that the meaning of the titles received by these teachers can influence their perception of themselves, their authority and power. In that regard, concerning subjectivity constitution processes, the author recalls Bakhtin, according to whom, when expression is materialized through language, it has a reversive effect on mental activity. Therefore, the exterior world is adapted to the possibilities of expression, its tendencies and orientations, a process which constitutes what he denominated "quotidian ideology", which, although not stationary or ordered in a system, follows the individuals' actions and states of consciousness (BAKHTIN, 2010).

It is also interesting to note the small (practically non-existent!) male participation among Early Childhood Education teachers, throughout history, to this day. According to Cerisara (2002), the search for a professional identity of teachers of young children demands that we take into consideration their gender, since the gender category is a decisive dimension in the organization of equality and inequality in society. It isn't redundant to remember, following considerations by historian Joan

Scott (1990, p. 14, our translation), that “[...] gender is a constitutive element of social relations based on differences perceived among sexes, and gender is a primary form of signifying power relations”.

According to Campos et al. (1991), this distancing of men from professions related to Early Childhood Education can be understood both through the attribute of “dirty” work (especially concerning nurseries) and through the lower wages offered for that work. In addition, the author lists another complicating factor: the sensuality that permeates the interaction between adult and young child. Although interdicted, “suspecting the presence of desire in that relationship is more easily admissible in the interaction woman-child than man-child” (CAMPOS et al., 1991, p. 54, our translation). Thus, when men devote themselves to educational work with young children, they are seen as “suspicious” in relation to their morality and their masculinity. This is a concerning fact, considering the importance of children being able to rely on a male reference in Early Childhood Education institutions, which is fundamental for their socialization and development processes, as emphasized by Cerisara (1996, p. 166, our translation):

The movement that seeks integration and complementarity between feminine and masculine supposes the creation of an open space for men to deal with affection, feeling, motherhood, as well as for professional practices with male features in Early Childhood Education institutions, in order to contribute with the rupture of gender discriminations in occupations related to the care and education of children between ages 0 and 6 and with the socialization process of boys and girls.

Still concerning that theme, it is important to observe the educational models proposed by the World Bank, which anticipate the recreation of programs that uphold gender subordination, such as home nurseries. According to Rosemberg (2002, p. 25, our translation), these programs:

[...] consider that women are destined to stay home, taking care of their children or other women’s children, without professional training or titles; that women with incomplete schooling deserve ‘mother courses’, with funding from Early Childhood Education, instead of complete qualification as citizens in the context of adult education; that men are inadequate beings to educate and care for children.

The countless legal and scientific advances, however, that have been achieved not only concerning women, but also children, especially through the implementation of the 1988 Constitution and the dissemination of social interactionist studies about human development and learning, entail a restructuring of social relations as a whole and the creation of social equipment. In this new perspective of the child as an individual with rights, protagonist of history and developing citizen, the role of the teacher is no longer that of molding behavior or transmitting knowledge to students, but that of an interlocutor who points paths, organizes environments and materials, and exchanges information with the pupil, in a reciprocal growth process.

According to Campos et al. (1994), the two modalities of service aimed at young children in Brazil, usually denominated “assistance” and “educational”, in which the first is intended for the working class and the second is for the middle class, are far from corresponding to the more current conceptions of child development. That happens because these new conceptions ground their curriculum proposals on quality criteria defined by European research groups, especially Italian, who, in turn, bring, in those proposals, an integrated character, without privileging one aspect to the detriment of another, but trying to handle all aspects, as appropriate for the children’s needs and interests and according to cultural standards and values of the society to which they belong. Therefore:

[...] the coherent perspective in the modern notion of care has been used to include all activities related to the protection of any child: feeding, washing, changing clothes, healing, protecting, comforting, that is, ‘caring’, all being an integral part of what we call ‘educating’. (CAMPOS, 1994, p. 35, our translation).

Kramer (2005), however, highlights the fact that the binomial caring-educating sometimes suggests the idea of two independent dimensions: one relative to the body, not considering that the action of caring isn’t restricted to hygiene, but encompasses global health, affection and moral values, and the other relative to cognitive processes. For that author, “pedagogy, aimed at teaching and working with ideas, doesn’t know how to handle the materiality of the body” (KRAMER, 2005, p. 65, our translation). In addition, we cannot forget that caring has been historically linked to assistance and the body, a task delegated to professionally unqualified people. Thus:

[...] in qualification spaces for professionals who work with young children, there is frequent controversy surrounding the two attributions, especially when it comes to public schools teachers, who, in countless cases, don't assume the function of caring for understanding it as relative to activities connected to the physical and domestic, such as feeding, bathing, taking care of the space where one works/studies. (KRAMER, 2005, p. 68-69, our translation).

Therefore, the separation between educating and caring also includes a hierarchical connotation established between teachers and assistants, where the former is responsible for the child's education, and the latter is responsible for childcare, in very restricted terms. According to Cerisara (2002), this hierarchization, which is official between the two professionals, is evidenced in concrete indicators, such as weekly workload, wages and qualification, which influences the differentiation between functions within institutions. There is the belief, however, that, in an integrated vision of Early Childhood Education, the coexistence of the two professionals, each responsible for a defined function, needs to be reconsidered. Oliveira-Formosinho (2001) understands the interconnection between education and childcare as a differential of the Early Childhood Education teacher's job, which precludes the separation of functions. According to that author, this accumulation of roles naturally expands their function when compared to the other education professionals.

Thus, despite the similarity between the role of Early Childhood Education teachers and of other teachers, there are many aspects that are particular to the former's job. These aspects constitute a specific professionalism of early childhood educators. In this context, Oliveira-Formosinho (2001) presents a framework organized surrounding three dimensions that express the singularity of the professionalism of educators in the first stage of basic education, which are: 1) characteristics of young children; 2) characteristics of the work context; and 3) characteristics of the process and tasks carried out by these educators. Concerning young children, the researcher mentions three specific traits resulted from their developmental stage, their growth processes and their vulnerability. According to the author, "the child is an integrated whole with intense dynamics" (OLIVEIRA-FORMOSINHO, 2001, p. 82, our translation). This "globality" of children require, from

teachers, expanded responsibilities for their functioning, besides generating an uncertainty in boundaries concerning their actions.

Besides that trait, young children show some dependence on adults in care routines (hygiene, cleanliness, health), a fact that highlights their vulnerability (physical, emotional, social) and is related to the need for privileged attention to socioemotional aspects indispensable for progress in different development areas. Regarding characteristics of the work context, Oliveira-Formosinho (2001) shows a variety of contexts where educational services are offered, among which are pedagogical contexts (with acknowledged educational intent) and custody contexts (where prevails a mission centered on safe keeping and caring for children while their parents work). This diversity of contexts influences teachers' work conditions when it comes to professional autonomy, work processes and interaction style toward the children.

The expanded scope of relations and interactions – with children, assistants, relatives, therapists, interns etc. – required from early childhood educators, on many levels, is also responsible for the larger range of their role and constitutes another singularity of their profession. In the words of Oliveira-Formosinho (2001, p. 89, our translation), “we can thus say that the early childhood educator’s professionalism is located in the world of interaction and there it develops roles, functions, activities, interfaces”. In addition, the specificity of Early Childhood Education is also revealed in the fact that it centers the pupil rather than the education process or the teacher.

Still according to that author, once the basic quality criteria are ensured, such as adult/child ratio and group size, the most important factors that contribute to a better quality in the teacher’s job are: qualification for individualization of the teaching-learning process, the emphasis on self-started activities, the teacher’s support of the child’s development, a positive social environment and parent involvement. Therefore, the educators’ personal and professional traits, such as sensibility and aptitude in motivating the child, define their interaction abilities in teaching-learning and constitute a critical factor in the quality of the child’s development and learning.

In this context, the Adult Involvement Observational Scale (BERTRAM apud OLIVEIRA-FORMOSINHO, 2001), a methodological tool used in many research projects in Brazil and other countries which provides a focus on the observer’s point of view about characteristics of adults’ interventions with children, selected as focus three

of the educator's scopes of action: 1) the sensibility of the adult toward the child; 2) the degree of autonomy that the adult grants the child; and 3) the degree of stimulation that the adult offers the child. According to Oliveira-Formosinho (2001), these three dimensions of the Early Childhood Education teacher's job proposed by the scale allow us to "dig deep" concerning respect for the children, as well as the belief in their competence and, therefore, their stimulation, through work proposals that arise from their needs and interests.

To that purpose, the teacher's role, for Reggio Emilia (apud EDWARDS, 1999, p. 161, our translation), is centered:

[...] on the generation of opportunities for discovery, through open and inspiring facilitation and stimulation of dialogue, through joint effort and construction of knowledge by the child. Since intellectual discovery is allegedly an essentially social process, the teacher actually helps when younger children learn to listen to others, to take into consideration their objectives and ideas and to communicate successfully.

Therefore, in Reggio's pedagogical proposal, the teacher is a real "partner" to the children, supporting them and offering help, resources and strategies in order for them to proceed when they find difficulties. It is important, however, to highlight that the Early Childhood Education teacher portrayal that grounds Reggio Emilia's philosophy depends on others, of childhood and child, which, in turn, can be reinvented by society. Said in another way, each society creates their own portrayal of what children are, which is reflected on the school that is proposed. Thus, a strong child portrayal is also an intense portrayal of teacher and school.

In Reggio's case, since the end of World War II, Malaguzzi's life was dedicated to establishing a didactic community, made up of teachers from different lines of study and expertise, working, for decades, with parents, society members and thousands of children in order to create a system that works nowadays. Despite the huge demand that teachers fulfill social ideals, which requires great effort and dedication from them, these professionals consider their job to be rewarding and compelling, as well as vital for the progress of society and human wellbeing (GARDNER, 1999).

4 A NEW TRAINING FOR A NEW TEACHER

In the face of so many expectations surrounding this new professional, who is going through a full-fledged constitution of their identity, specific job qualification is increasingly necessary. Oliveira (2004) argues that the qualification of this new teacher must include technical knowledge and the development of abilities to perform different tasks, particularly expressive, and to interact with young children. The document Information on accreditation and operation of Early Childhood Education institutions (Subsídios para credenciamento e funcionamento de instituições de Educação Infantil, in Portuguese) (BRASIL, 1998, p. 18) defends that “children need educators who are qualified, articulate, capable of expressing the importance, the how and the why of their practice [...]” (our translation). Kuhlmann Jr. (1998), reflecting on the construction of pedagogical proposals that have the child as a starting point, warns: “[...] it is not the children who must master curriculum content, but the people who educate them” (KUHLMANN JR., 1998, p. 65, our translation). In this context, LDB/1996, in Article 62, requires, as a minimum, a high school level qualification, in the teaching modality, for a teacher to be able to work with Early Childhood Education groups, which constitutes progress, considering the number of teachers with no training that worked with children from ages zero to six throughout history.

Until now, however, a high school or higher education diploma doesn't guarantee adequate preparation to work with young children (CRUZ, 1996). A Pedagogy student, for example, can graduate without taking any courses specific to Early Childhood Education, since, in most colleges, those courses are optional. Noticing that fact, the Board of Education of Ceará, for example, included in Resolution N. 361/2000 the following requirement:

[...] to include in the curriculum of high school and higher education courses (teacher training, associate degrees or graduate schools) subjects covering the following themes: child development; history, conceptions and functions of Early Childhood Education; strategies for organizing space and materials in the context of Early Childhood Education; specific conception and curriculum structure for Early Childhood Education, including special didactics. (our translation).

Another aspect that has been the target of attention, when it comes to redefining the curriculum of Pedagogy courses, concerns the need to expand students' teaching experiences at Early Childhood Education institutions. There is the belief that having contact with children since the beginning of the course will help students understand their role in relation to caring for and educating children, sparking discussions that will enrich their training and avoiding possible professional frustration. Thus, we observe a great difference between having a degree to work with young children and having adequate training for that role. The first case regards a title that grants the student the "authorization", through a degree, to work in Early Childhood Education, while the second case entails a whole process through which the student has close contact with several specific subjects to work with young children, having the opportunity to reflect about countless situations and realities of the field and in which the diploma represents the summit of the journey.

The fights that have been waged for adequate, quality training for Early Childhood Education teachers cannot forget that work conditions and professional valorization, among other factors, also influence the work done by these educators and must be taken into consideration by public policies. On the other hand, we must pay greater attention in order to avoid old mistakes in the search for better training for children's teachers, so that more chances of success can be glimpsed in this endeavor.

According to Cruz (1996), teacher training courses for Early Childhood Education cannot lose sight of two great groups of information that must be processed: 1) the one concerning the *child and their family* – child development in its multiple dimensions; the family's history, socioeconomic conditions, habits, values, games etc.; 2) and the other with information concerning the *nursery/preschool and the work that will be developed with children and their families* – a little history and the current situation of the service toward children in Brazil; topics in language, math, science, arts and physical activities; information about the outline of programming, the planning of routine and activities, organization of spaces and materials, evaluations etc.; data about nutritional needs and problems in childhood, organization of meal plans, and the health of young children; ethics legislation concerning children and the operation of nurseries and preschools.

Besides the aforementioned knowledge, the author emphasizes that it is necessary for teacher training courses to develop the abilities and competence of teachers, among which the observation (not only of the children, but of their own work) and decentering their own point of view, in order to better understand the children's way of thinking so that the teacher is able to problematize and instigate it.

After extensive bibliographic review about the specificity of teacher training for Early Childhood Education, Machado (1998) proposes four basic axes to consider in qualification proposals in that field: 1) *growth and development of young children* – discussing basic aspects in health and child development, the adaptation period, toys as mediators of child development etc.; 2) *Early Childhood Education professionals and the quotidian* – encompassing the creation of a pedagogical proposal, the organization of spaces, available materials and established routines, among others; 3) *professional identity* – comprising prejudices and stereotypes, professional ethics, the implications of working with children and their families, the possibilities of professional training etc.; and 4) *education systems* – a history of Early Childhood Education in education systems, legislation, among other themes.

According to Oliveira (2003, p. 8, emphasis added, our translation):

[...] since in the relationship with the children the teachers repeat their own childhood experiences, in their professional training they need to recognize their *emotions*, process certain *feelings* that arise with the profession, continuously analyze their *own frustrations* and *aggressiveness* in order to establish a safe relationship with the children, constructing knowledge with them in a caring environment and having a more autonomous understanding of their own work.

According to Porto and Cruz (2004), it is essential that teacher training courses for Early Childhood Education provide contact with play, considering the importance of the relationship between playing and child development. According to the authors, when teachers understand that the “language of the toy can change life in/of school” (PORTO; CRUZ, 2004, p. 220, our translation), they can radically change their educational practices.

In order for that awareness to happen, though, and for the teacher to internalize the “knowledge/feeling” of the importance of play for the children, it isn't enough just to discuss the theme theoretically:

It is essential to experience it so that teachers can realize, through their own hands, eyes, ears, body, their own moral and educational values, that play is important for the child to develop, with a rich contribution not only to the psychological aspect, but also the sociocultural and pedagogical aspects. Therefore, it is necessary, beyond knowing the significance of play, for the teacher to play. (PORTO; CRUZ, 2004, p. 221-222, our translation).

Considering everything that has been discussed so far, it becomes evident that, if there is the intention to improve the quality of services offered to young children, it is necessary to commit to the quality of their teachers, which, in turn, is connected to their professional training. This way, there will also be a contribution for the promotion of educational practices that allow these children to acquire elements that will enable them to actively participate in their society, which is complex, but can and should be fair. It consists, we cannot forget, of a group of measures that needs special attention from the Brazilian government, especially concerning the budget. Although perspectives are far from encouraging in the current context, in which public spending with essential services is limited by the inflationary index, there must be pressure on authorities in order to raise their awareness of the médium – and long-term damage that can be caused by the lack of funding in such a historically neglected area as Early Childhood Education.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Discussing themes that influence teacher practice in Early Childhood Education, such as proposed here, seems fundamental for increasing the quality of this first stage of basic education. It is certain that having a title which allows work with young children isn't a guarantee that it will happen and that teachers will perform quality work with them, since countless factors of other natures also interfere, such as the vicissitudes of public policies directed for that field. That means, among other things, that we cannot delegate total responsibility exclusively to teacher training, because other elements (prevailing ideology, lack of professional identity, unfavorable work conditions...) also interfere in the creation/recreation of representations.

According to Diógenes (1998), teacher training courses must foster reflections about the most frequent themes of representation, i.e., about issues that unsettle

teachers and interfere in their practice. Complementing that thought, however, we believe that some themes, such as those investigated here, should be common in all teacher training, since they probably inform the practice of all teachers. Therefore, issues concerning gender and the specificities that surround this profession, for example, must be the subject of constant debate in all teacher training courses.

Last, but not least, there must be strong engagement against the perverse way that the Brazilian government handles education funding, harmful enough when considered as a whole, but especially detrimental to Early Childhood Education. Thus, a political attitude is necessary in those who defend the education cause in our country, because nowadays neoliberal thought flourishes in the high circles of power and, as we know, underfunding will not lead to the quality increase expected in the public education sphere in Brazil.

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André Dionei Fonseca (Brazil, Pará, Santarém)
Federal University of Western Pará (Ufopa)

PhD in Social History from the University of São Paulo (USP). Adjunct Professor of the Ufopa History Course. Professor of the Graduate Program in Education of Ufopa.

Lattes: <<http://lattes.cnpq.br/5794497383094905>>.

E-mail: <andredionei@yahoo.com.br>.

Anselmo Alencar Colares (Brazil, Pará, Santarém)
Federal University of Western Pará (Ufopa)

PhD in Education from the Federal University of Campinas (Unicamp). Full Professor of Pedagogy at Ufopa. Professor of the Graduate Program in Education of Ufopa.

Lattes: <<http://lattes.cnpq.br/1107767923215438>>.

E-mail: <anselmo.colares@gmail.com>.

Sinara Almeida da Costa (Brazil, Pará, Santarém)
Federal University of Western Pará (Ufopa)

PhD in Education from the Federal University of Ceará (UFC). Assistant Professor of Pedagogy at Ufopa. Professor of the Graduate Program in Education of Ufopa.

Lattes: <<http://lattes.cnpq.br/4985156340614183>>.

E-mail: <sinaraacs@hotmail.com>.

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