

Ensuring access to education for peasant children: Multigrade Early Childhood Education in Altamira, Pará



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Abstract

Brazilian legislation, represented by the Federal Constitution of 1988 and the Law of Guidelines and Bases (Law no. 9.394/1996), ensures the right of children to education. However, in the Amazon region of Par , due to the vast territorial extension, the practice of teaching in multigrade classes is common, uniting Early Childhood Education and Elementary School, which is contrary to Resolution No. 2, of April 28, 2008. Therefore, this study aims to highlight how Early Childhood Education is organized in multigrade classrooms in the city of Altamira, Par . This qualitative and descriptive research analyzed data obtained from the Municipal Department of Education of Altamira, revealing that most schools in the region offer Early Childhood Education in a multigrade manner, with 17 institutions that combine this stage with Elementary School I.

Keywords

Early Childhood Education in the countryside; multi-grade education; legislation.

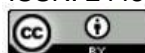
Garantia do acesso   educa o  s crian as camponesas: o Ensino Infantil multisseriado em Altamira, Par 

Resumo

A legisla o brasileira, representada pela Constitui o Federal de 1988 e pela Lei de Diretrizes e Bases (Lei n  9.394/1996), assegura o direito das crian as   educa o. No entanto, na regi o amaz nica do Par , devido   vasta extens o territorial,   comum a pr tica de ensino em classes multisseriadas, unindo a Educa o Infantil e o Ensino Fundamental, o que contraria a Resolu o n  2, de 28 de abril de 2008. Por isso, este estudo tem como objetivo principal destacar como a Educa o Infantil   organizada em salas multisseriadas na cidade de Altamira, Par . Esta pesquisa qualitativa e descritiva analisou dados obtidos na Secretaria Municipal de Educa o de Altamira, revelando que a maioria das escolas na regi o oferece Educa o Infantil de forma multisseriada, com 17 institui es que combinam essa etapa com o Ensino Fundamental I.

Palavras-chave

Educa o Infantil no campo; ensino multisseriado; legisla o.



Garantizar el acceso a la educación de los niños campesinos: Educación Infantil multigrado en Altamira, Pará

Resumen

La legislación brasileña, representada por la Constitución Federal de 1988 y la Ley de Directrices y Bases (Ley nº 9.394/1996), garantiza el derecho de los niños a la educación. Sin embargo, en la región amazónica de Pará, debido a la vasta extensión territorial, es común impartir clases en clases multigrado, combinando Educación Infantil y Educación Primaria, lo que contradice la Resolución nº 2, de 28 de abril de 2008. Por lo tanto, el principal objetivo del estudio es resaltar cómo se organiza la Educación Infantil en las aulas multigrado de la ciudad de Altamira, Pará. Esta investigación cualitativa y descriptiva analizó datos obtenidos de la Secretaría Municipal de Educación de Altamira, revelando que la mayoría de las escuelas de la región ofrecen Educación Infantil en formato multigrado, con 17 instituciones que combinan esta etapa con Educación Primaria I.

Palabras clave

Educación Infantil rural; docencia multigrado; legislación.

1. INTRODUCTION

Brazilian legislation, represented by the Federal Constitution of 1988 and the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDBEN) of 1996, ensures the right to education of children, including those living in rural contexts. In these places, it is essential not only to guarantee access to education, but also to promote education that respects and values local cultures, such as that of farmers, extractivists, artisanal fishermen, among others.

In the state of Pará (PA), especially in distant and difficult-to-reach communities, teaching is often organized through multigrade classes. This means that children of different ages and grades share the same classroom, with a single teacher, even if this goes against what is established in the legislation. Despite the guidelines that recommend the separation of children from Early Childhood Education and Elementary School, multigrade classes are still a common reality in the field.

Multi-grade classrooms are a type of educational structure in which students of different ages and levels of education share the same space, under the supervision of a single teacher. Present mainly in rural areas, these multigrade classrooms have historical origins in Brazil's colonial period, when unskilled and itinerant teachers taught the children of landowners and, by extension, the children of their workers, after the expulsion of the Jesuits from the country in 1759.

In 1827, the General Law of Education was approved by the imperial government, which introduced the mutual education system, also known as monitoring. In this method,

students who were more advanced in learning were in charge of teaching the younger ones and/or at less advanced levels. Known as the Lancasterian Method, it was brought from England to Brazil and considered a breakthrough in nineteenth-century Brazilian education (Hage, 2010; Santos; Moura, 2010).

With the advent of the Republic in 1889, the School Groups emerged and with them the serial education system was introduced, which became popular mainly in urban areas, as indicated by Santos and Moura (2010). Meanwhile, in small towns and rural areas, isolated schools with multigrade classrooms continued to function to deal with demographic and population density issues, a reality that persists to this day. This process of expansion and internalization of School Groups continued throughout the twentieth century.

From 1990 onwards, there was a significant change in Brazil's economy, which resulted in a reorganization of the administrative structure of education, with the transfer of responsibilities to the municipalities, especially for the initial years of education, among other changes. This period was characterized by the consequences of the end of the military regime in 1984, along with the implementation of neoliberal policies. Both in the countryside and throughout the country, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a revival of social movements, with the strengthening of the union of rural workers and their struggles, resulting in the formation of movements such as the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) and the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB), among others.

With the implementation of LDBEN nº 9.394/1996, the multigrade schools located in the countryside were closed, with the centralization in the municipal headquarters, due to the municipalization process and the changes caused by neoliberal policies that affected the educational sector. Simultaneously, Rural Education emerged as a result of the demands of rural social movements for access to educational policies aimed at workers in this region. Through this model, the Municipal Departments of Education in the Amazon region of Pará are able to bring education closer to children, preventing them from having to move to other communities.

According to Hage (2011), multigrade classes require the teacher to perform several functions, serving students at different stages of teaching. This means dealing with a wide diversity of ages and learning levels, requiring the use of methodologies adapted to this challenging reality.

Within a classroom considered “conventional”, with students of the same year/grade grouped in different classes, known as “multigrade”, the teacher faces the challenge of preparing to meet the needs of several classes at the same time.

According to population estimates until 2021, of the 19 countries examined in this report, the population of Latin America is estimated to reach about 630 million individuals. Almost 90 million are children aged 0-8 years, representing 14.2% of the total in the region. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2020), 46.2% of children aged 0 to 14 live in poverty in Latin America and only 6 out of 10 children aged 3 to 4 have access to education in the first phase of their lives. In the last three decades, childhood has occupied an increasingly important place in public discussions and government agendas in the region.

The provision of services in Early Childhood Education establishments as a social right of children is ensured in the 1988 Constitution, which recognizes Early Childhood Education as a State responsibility in the field of Education. This advance was the result of a broad mobilization of community movements, feminist movements, labor movements, and the country's pro-democratization movements, along with the tireless work of education professionals. Since then, the area of Early Childhood Education has undergone an intense process of reviewing concepts about the education of children in collective environments, with the objective of strengthening pedagogical practices that stimulate child learning and development.

In particular, it is essential to reflect on how to guide activities with children up to 3 years old in daycare centers, as well as to ensure adequate practices with children aged 4 and 5 that favor the continuity of the learning and development process, without advancing content that will be addressed in Elementary School.

The first phase of school education, available in daycare centers and kindergartens, are places that do not belong to the domestic environment and are considered as public or private educational institutions that provide care and education for children from 0 to 5 years old during the day, full or part-time. These places are regulated and supervised by responsible bodies of the educational system and are subject to the control of society. It is the responsibility of the State to guarantee access to early childhood education in a public, free and quality way, without the need for prior selection.

According to Fonseca, Colares and Costa (2019), young children demonstrate an adult dependence on care routines, such as hygiene, cleaning and health. This highlights their physical, emotional and social vulnerability, indicating the importance of special care for the socio-emotional aspects essential for advancement in several areas of their development.

2. Methodology

In this context, this article aims to highlight the Early Childhood Education classes present in multigrade Rural Education in the city of Altamira, located in the state of Pará, in the Trans-Amazonian and Xingu regions.

Regarding the educational scenario of the countryside, according to information from the Municipal Department of Education of Altamira (SEMED), there are a total of 68 schools in the countryside, 17 of which offer multigrade education, according to a survey carried out by three participants of the Study and Research Group on Education and Science Teaching in the Amazon (PPGEECA) in 2024.

This investigation has a qualitative character, since it focuses on meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values and attitudes (Minayo; Deslandes; Gomes, 2009). It is a descriptive approach, whose objective is to describe the characteristics of certain populations or phenomena (Gil, 2008).

SEMED in Altamira/PA was asked for data that could clarify how classes work with students from different grades that include the area of Early Childhood Education and Elementary School in the early years.

The trajectory of the evolution of the concept of child and childhood and the implementation of Early Childhood Education in various scenarios went through several moments until it was ensured by law, covering the education of children and their various forms of childhood.

For a better understanding of the entire context covered, it is necessary to describe some relevant events, distributed in the subsequent stages of the research.

3. Findings and debates

The structure of the discussions was divided into five main categories: 3.1) Childhood, the child, historical assistance and Education: a brief introduction; 3.2) Historical

scenario of the multigrade modality; 3.3) Early childhood education; 3.4) Teaching for children in different age groups; and 3.5) Childhood in the countryside and educational diversity in Altamira/PA.

In addition to the categories, we also present the conclusions, in this scenario, the importance of continuous and specialized training of educators working in Early Childhood Education in rural areas stands out, where the classes are formed by children of different ages. By the way, it is essential to provide pedagogical materials and suitable environments for rural children to experience their own routines, interact according to their reality and learn through experiences linked to nature and local traditions. It is essential that the school curriculum takes into account the cultural practices, the work of families and the ways of playing characteristic of these communities.

3.1 Childhood, the child, historical assistance and Education: a brief introduction

For many years of history, the child has been ignored by society. She did not receive the attention and care necessary for her existence, due to the lack of understanding about childhood at that time. According to Kramer (2007, p. 14), “[...] the effective participation of children and their roles vary according to the structures of society”, therefore, in different societies, childhood was not perceived in the same way, being defined by the historical context, by the social class to which the children belonged and by the way they were seen.

Ariès (2012) points out that, in the Middle Ages, the child was portrayed as a miniature adult, without considering its specific characteristics. The absence of representations that showed the child in its relationship with childhood and its young age was not due to the lack of talent of the artists of the time, but rather to the lack of feelings that allowed to reveal childhood at that time. However, Ariès (2012) points out that it was in art that the first faithful representations of the child emerged, indicating the beginning of a feeling of childhood closer to what we know today. The author describes these representations as a “kind of child.”

In the thirteenth century, children were analyzed according to the standards determined by the society of that time. Due to the lack of appreciation of childhood, children were practically ignored in the midst of a society dominated by adults. The sensitivity of the

artists played a crucial role in rescuing the importance attributed to children, at a time when this stage of life was poorly understood.

Kuhlmann Júnior (2015) points out that, although medieval art has shown the evolution of children's representations, it cannot be said that affection for them did not exist before the 12th century. Old records indicate that families were already concerned about children, demonstrated in the manufacture of clothes, furniture and toys suitable to serve them.

During the 15th and 18th centuries, which represent the era of Modernity, there was an intense social, cultural and economic transformation. It was in this context of change that the first concepts about childhood and the importance of caring for children according to their individual needs emerged. According to Guimarães (2017, p. 83-84), it was in this period that the first practices of childcare began to be developed, “[...] knowledge produces other ways of understanding and attending to childhood in the family and institutional context that marked the practices of childcare in different historical moments and in different contexts”.

The period of the Modern Era was marked by the Industrial Revolution, a historical event of great impact due to technological advancement, changes in labor relations and transformations in the production of the time. In this context, education came to be seen as essential for children, who were considered beings in need of care and protection and who should not work. Ways were found, therefore, to ensure that children had access to education, but this right was not equal for all children, as it depended on their social, cultural and economic condition.

According to Kramer (2007, p. 15), “[...] the idea of modern childhood was universalized based on a pattern of middle-class children, based on criteria of age and dependence on the adult, characteristic of their insertion within these classes”. Thus, not all young children were considered as children, as those who could already perform certain activities without depending on adults did not fit this definition. In addition, as this idea of a child arose in specific social contexts, children who did not belong to privileged social classes, such as the daughters of workers, did not have the same rights.

Many of these children, regardless of age, had a childhood marked by poverty and work in inappropriate situations (Kramer, 2007). With the Industrial Revolution, educational processes began to be directed to the training of specialized labor for industries. With the

introduction of machines, part of this work was replaced and it was no longer necessary only physical strength, a characteristic attributed to men, but rather skills to operate the machines, valence seen as a talent of women for their delicacy. Thus, women began to enter work environments that were previously exclusive to men.

The Industrial Revolution caused countless transformations in family environments. It was in this context, around the nineteenth century, that the first support entities emerged in Europe. The purpose of these organizations was to assist families in basic care for children, such as food, hygiene and protection. Subsequently, these same entities would become places also focused on educational issues (Guimarães, 2017).

In the same way as at the global level, in Brazil, the trajectory of children and childhood was also marked by difficult paths. The first organizations to support the needy in Brazil emerged around the 18th century, called "Casa de Expostos". They were places destined to take care of orphaned children and illegitimate children; fruits of the masters' oppression imposed on enslaved women.

In this context, it was common for children to be abandoned or even die, since they were not wanted and left helpless; even when they were welcomed in institutions, there was no guarantee of survival (Guimarães, 2017). It was only around 1875, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, that the first signs of valuing childhood in Brazil began to emerge, with the inauguration of the first kindergarten founded by doctor José Menezes Vieira and Carlota de Menezes Vieira, his wife.

Initially, the area was reserved exclusively for boys, from wealthy families in the industrial sector, but the doctor argued that education should be accessible to everyone, including children from the less privileged class and the children of slaves. According to Guimarães (2017), the first daycare center for the children of the workers was established in 1899, in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The purpose of this establishment was to ensure the safety of the children while their mothers were working.

In Rio de Janeiro, in 1909, the first public school was opened for children aged 4 to 7, girls and boys. Since then, several improvements in Early Childhood Education have been recorded throughout Brazil's history, with the State striving to ensure assistance for children. An important milestone was the Federal Constitution of 1988, which included childhood as a social right in article 6 and education as an obligation for all children in article 208.

It is understood that the child is intrinsically linked to the stage of childhood. It is not possible to dissociate them, since one is an intrinsic part of the other; thus, for the child it is important that he can experience his childhood with love, affection and attention. It is also essential that their rights gained over time are fully respected, as they are recognized as subjects of social and cultural rights.

In the 21st century, the struggle for the guarantee and realization of these rights is still a reality in the history of children and childhood in Brazil and around the world, since many children are still deprived of many of these rights acquired over time. It is common to find children who live without the minimum conditions for their survival, facing poverty, neglect, violence, lack of protection and even armed conflict as obstacles to guaranteeing these rights, however, as previously mentioned, this varies according to the contexts in which they are inserted and how society perceives them.

In some rural regions of Brazil, however, especially in rural areas, the realization of this right is carried out through classrooms that cover several grades. In this sense, the scenario of multigrade rooms for rural communities will be addressed, highlighting the advancement of this format in these locations.

3.2 Historical scenario of the multigrade modality

The development of education in Brazil began during Portuguese colonization. With the arrival of the Society of Jesus in the country, the main intention was to convert indigenous peoples to Christianity, spreading its ethical principles and values. During this period, education was restricted to the most privileged layers of society, while the population with the lowest purchasing power was excluded from access to education.

After the Jesuits were expelled from Brazil, a new system of public education was implemented to replace the Jesuit style, called “royal classes,” in which teachers were appointed by the king. These classes were held without prior planning, independently of each other. This allowed students to attend different classes without losing content, as they were not interconnected. Thus, multigrade teaching began due to the absence of a specific organization for each stage of student development (Locks; Almeida; Pacheco, 2013).

The multigrade consists of a teaching model that takes place in schools located in rural areas. In this format, a single teacher works simultaneously with students from different classes, with varying ages and at different levels of learning. As Silva and Oliveira

(2021, p. 65) point out, “[...] multigrade classes are groups that bring together students with different levels of learning and ages. They usually present themselves with a single teacher [...]”.

According to Pianovski and Oliveira (2017, p. 172), multigrade schools “[...] emerged in Brazil after the expulsion of the Jesuits and were linked or not to the State. They coexisted with street teachers, who went from farm to farm to teach the first letters, and were made official by the Government of Education in 1827”.

During the imperial period, multigrade classes were officially established through the Law of October 15, 1827. According to article 1 of this law, “The presence of first letter classes will be mandatory in all cities, towns and most populated places” (Brasil, 1827). This legislation aimed to ensure the expansion of basic education to more remote areas, in order to provide the Elementary School of the time, which consisted mainly of learning to read, write and count. As highlighted by Locks, Almeida and Pacheco (2013, p. 5):

[...] multigrade schools (multigrade classes) emerged in this period when the teaching of the first letters, financed or not by the State, was spread from farm to farm by itinerant teachers or by someone that the community considered capable of instructing others. This also happened in small villages and towns, through the gathering of children of various levels, regardless of age group, in the same school environment and with a single teacher.

The classes were taught in improvised places selected by the teachers themselves, who moved from community to community to teach. Teaching in multigrade classes has developed precariously throughout the history of education in Brazil. As highlighted by Locks, Almeida and Pacheco (2013, p. 5): “At that time, there were few schools, many of them isolated and regular, operating in inadequate spaces and with a shortage of pedagogical and teaching resources, as well as inadequate physical facilities for educational practice”.

In the 1920s, there was a significant change in the education system, which began to be structured through serialization. This was due to the reforms carried out at the end of the Empire, which resulted in the replacement of the traditional model of a single teacher teaching classes to a group of students with different levels of knowledge. School groups emerged, in which students were grouped according to sex, age and educational performance.

Locks, Almeida and Pacheco (2013) point out that, in ancient times, the separation of students in the educational system was based on the level of learning, leaving out those

who most needed education. According to the authors, education should have clear objectives, such as preparing individuals for the labor market, transforming education into a product to be consumed according to the financial conditions of each family. This division transformed education, which was to be accessible to all, into an exclusionary system that separated elite and proletariat. The less privileged were often abandoned for lack of resources to continue their studies.

From the promulgation of the Federal Constitution of 1988, the municipalities had autonomy to organize their own education system. As a result, with the creation of the Municipal Departments of Education, there was a greater control and rationalization of the pedagogical work developed in schools, among which were those with multigrade classes. This autonomy had, however, the consequence of a plastering of pedagogical practices in multigrade classes, which had difficulty in establishing their own dynamics in their teaching (Pianovski; Oliveira, 2017, p. 173).

However, in remote and difficult to access regions, it is still common to find schools that adopt the multigrade system to offer education. The Departments of Education use this form of organization as an alternative to guarantee formal education to rural populations. The multigrade class model is still present in several schools around Brazil, due to the low demand for students residing in communities far from large urban centers.

Briefly, the progress of multigrade classes “[...] reflects, in a way, the needs that have arisen as a result of the evolution of socio-agricultural structures in the country” (CALAZANS; Silva, 1983, p. 3). It was in this context that rural education was established, based on a multigrade class structure, with no political-pedagogical and curricular system for this type of teaching. Within this context, we find Early Childhood Education, in which preschool children are grouped in the same class with older children who attend elementary school.

3.3 Early Childhood Education

The children's search for a place to ensure their learning process was reinforced at other times throughout its implementation. One of the important moments in the history of the recognition of these rights in Brazil was the creation of the Statute of Children and Adolescents (ECA), through Law No. 8,069, of July 13, 1990. The ECA allowed the consolidation of the rights of the child that were already present in the Federal Constitution of 1988; in addition, it encouraged and involved several research institutions in the fight for

an Early Childhood Education with innovative characteristics, different from those already existing, contributing to the debates of the new LDBEN.

With the implementation of the new LDBEN on December 20, 1996, Early Childhood Education became the first phase of Basic Education. According to Oliveira (2008, p. 117-118), LDBEN promoted a restructuring of the educational system in Brazil, since it expands:

[...] the concept of basic education, which now covers early childhood education, elementary school and high school. It expands the concept of education, linking the training process to the world of work and the social practice exercised in family, labor, leisure and social life relationships. It increases the responsibilities of school units (including daycare centers and preschools) and determines that education systems guarantee progressive degrees of pedagogical, administrative and financial management autonomy to their school units.

With the new teaching approaches for children established at LDBEN, it was necessary to create pedagogical proposals for this educational phase. From the elaboration of the National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Education (RCNEI) (Brasil, 1998) by the Ministry of Education (MEC), the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI) were established through Resolution No. 5, of December 17, 2009, which addresses the structure of pedagogical plans for Early Childhood Education based on two essential principles: interaction and play (Brasil, 2009). In 2017, with the introduction of the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), approved by Ordinance No. 1,570, of December 20, 2017, a new structure in Early Childhood Education offered to children was established.

Based on the guiding principles of educational practices established by the DCNEI (Brasil, 2010b), six rights related to children's learning and development were listed in this document, aiming to provide conditions for them to educate themselves and actively participate in the construction of knowledge in challenging environments. This implies the conception of the child as a subject capable of producing knowledge, interacting in different social contexts, creating meanings in relation to themselves, others and the world around them (Brasil, 2017).

All the transformations in the availability of Early Childhood Education have happened in different contexts throughout history. There are still many improvements to be made, as, for some children, the realization of the rights to education still faces several obstacles.

In rural areas, the provision of Early Childhood Education for riverside children, from settlements, quilombolas, caiçaras, among others, is ensured by law, however the existence of exclusive institutions for these groups is scarce. In several regions of the country, Early Childhood Education is still carried out in classrooms with students from different grades, an old school organization model that is still present and, in many cases, along with Elementary School.

As pointed out by A. Silva, Pasuch and J. Silva (2012, p. 37), “[...] one of the greatest challenges in guaranteeing the right to Early Childhood Education of rural babies and children is to connect the guiding principles of Early Childhood Education globally with the forms of care in different territorial areas”. Thus, in the educational availability for children in multigrade environments, there is an approach that goes against what is provided for in Brazilian legislation.

3.4 Teaching for children in different age groups

Based on the demands of the MST, together with other groups, such as the rubber tappers in the struggle for labor and land rights, the indigenous peoples in the demarcation of their territories and the quilombola community for the recognition of their territories, the need for a specialized school in the field was established. These demands aimed at improvements and new pedagogical practices for Rural Education, something essential for the rural popular class. This resulted in the legal requirement of Basic Education in rural areas.

Decree No. 7.352, of November 4, 2010, addresses the Rural Education strategy and the National Program for Education in Agrarian Reform (Pronea); in its article 4, point I, it governs the “[...] availability of early childhood education as the first stage of elementary education in rural daycare centers and preschools, fostering the full development of children from zero to five years of age”.

Early Childhood Education, according to LDBEN, “[...] aims at the complete development of children up to 5 years old, considering their physical, mental, intellectual and social aspects, complementing the influence of the family and the community”, and Resolution No. 1, of April 3, 2002, which establishes the Operational Guidelines for Basic Education in rural schools, determines in its article 15:

Art. 15. In compliance with the provisions of § 2, of art. 2, of Law 9.424, of 1996 [...], the Government will take into account: I - The responsibilities of the Union, the States, the Federal District and the Municipalities with school attendance in all stages and modalities of Basic Education, including the variation in demographic density and in the teacher/student ratio; II - The specificities of the field, observed in meeting the requirements of didactic materials, equipment, laboratories and conditions of displacement of students and teachers only when school attendance cannot be ensured directly in rural communities.

The determinations establish that rural communities have the right to education and it is up to the State and municipalities to provide access to daycare centers and preschools, ensuring Early Childhood Education for rural communities in their own regions, taking into account their sociocultural and demographic characteristics.

Among the various educational institutions present in peasant communities, there are multigrade classes. Most schools located in the countryside adopt this teaching model to serve the communities furthest from urban centers, in places of difficult access, where there are few children and adolescents of school age. According to Lazaretti and França (2021, p. 8), there are three categories that define this organization:

The Brazilian Education System classifies multigrade classes into three class categories: unified, multi-stage and multi. The unified classes concentrate the students of early childhood education. Multi-stage is the class that serves both kindergarten and elementary school students at the same time. And the denomination multi refers to a class with students of more than one year of elementary school.

Due to this reason, several educational institutions that have multigrade classrooms that serve three or more classes at the same time, including those that combine Early Childhood Education with Elementary School, are classified as multi-stage. Such form of organization is considered inadequate according to the legislation in force. According to Benigno, Vasconcelos and Franco (2023, p. 110):

[...] classes composed of children from Early Childhood Education and Elementary School, called multigrade classes, have become essential arrangements, designed to ensure constitutional law and access to education for children residing in places far from the urban area, especially in the Amazonian context.

The structural issues of schools are fundamental to ensure the quality of education. The MEC established more than twenty years ago the National Infrastructure Parameters for Early Childhood Education institutions, aiming at the proper functioning of public and private institutions. In addition, Decree No. 7.352, of November 4, 2010, which deals with the Rural Education Policy and Pronera, also addresses the importance of the infrastructure of rural schools. It is the responsibility of the Federal Government to create

and implement mechanisms that guarantee the maintenance and development of Rural Education in public educational policies. The National Infrastructure Parameters underscore the importance of basic infrastructure conditions in all schools that provide the first segment of school education, whether in rural or urban areas.

According to the aforementioned legal norms, the physical infrastructure of schools needs to be planned taking into account the accessibility, functionality and reflection of the school community, in addition to encouraging the teaching and learning process.

According to Kowaltowski and his team (2006), school architecture should create environments that prioritize comfort, functionality, economy and aesthetics, using artistic, scientific, technical and environmental psychology knowledge. They point out that environmental comfort, covering thermal, acoustic, visual and functional aspects, is one of the architectural aspects that most impact well-being (Kowaltowski *et al.*, 2006), so the physical structure of schools plays a fundamental role in the quality of education.

The scarcity of places for Early Childhood Education in rural, water and forest schools and the use of the multigrade model are obstacles to ensure quality education for these children, who end up mixing with elementary school students, forming classes with different age groups. Thus, there is a need to adapt the curriculum to meet, plan and implement appropriate teaching methods to deal with such diverse groups.

The various educational institutions of rural schools cannot be excluded from conversations about improvements or be apart from society. The idea that classes with different levels of education result in low quality education needs to be demystified, highlighting the lack of effectiveness of public policies for Rural Education, as well as the absence of investments, guidance and specific training to deal with these classes. Given this, the question arises: what is the situation of Rural Early Childhood Education in Altamira, Pará?

3.5 Childhood in rural areas and educational diversity in Altamira/PA

The debates presented derive from reflections carried out by three researchers linked to the State University of Pará (UEPA) and the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR) and linked to the Research Group on Education and Teaching of Sciences in the Amazon (Gepeeca).

The state of Pará is one of the 27 federative units of Brazil, located in the northern region of the country. Its capital is Belém, with the acronym PA. It is the second largest state in territorial extension and the most populous in the North. With an area of 1,245,870.704 km², Pará borders Suriname and Amapá to the north, Maranhão and Tocantins to the east, Mato Grosso to the south, the Atlantic Ocean to the northeast, and Guyana and Roraima to the northwest. It has 144 municipalities and a population of 8.1 million inhabitants, according to estimates by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in 2015. Its Human Development Index (HDI) is 0.690 and those born in Pará are known as *Paraense*. Some of the main cities are Belém, Abaetetuba, Altamira, Ananindeua, Barcarena, Castanhal, Itaituba, Marabá, Parauapebas, Redenção, Santarém and Tucuruí.

Altamira is a city in Brazil that is located in the state of Pará, in the northern region of the country. In 2022, it is estimated that its population was 126,279 inhabitants. With an extension of 159,533.328 km², according to IBGE data in 2022, Altamira is considered the municipality with the largest territorial area in Brazil. As previously mentioned, the city has 68 rural schools, 17 of which offer teaching in multigrade classes. In order to demonstrate the structure of the Early Childhood Education classes in the municipality, information was requested from SEMED.

In a report, all data regarding the provision of Early Childhood Education in schools located in the countryside for the year 2024 are gathered, including the number of schools, number of children enrolled, ways of organizing classes (multi-stage, serial, kindergarten and multigrade classes) and the number of schools that do not offer Early Childhood Education. Table 1 presents this information.

Table 1 – Organization of Rural Early Childhood Education in the municipality of Altamira /PA-2024

Number of educational institutions in the field		Polo schools (10)
		* Attached schools (58)
		Number of children enrolled
Number of schools that offer Early Childhood Education	23 schools (including attachments)	598
Daycare:	0	0
Multi-stage	5	57
Multiseriate (Pre-I and Pre-II)	12	169
Serialization	0	0
There is no Early Childhood Education	45	-
Normal mode	6	372

* **Attached schools:** These are small schools. They usually contain only one classroom, located in the same community as the polo school. Polo schools are larger and host several nearby communities.

Source: Authorial production based on information provided by the coordination of schools in the field of water and forests of the municipal network of Altamira/PA (Altamira, 2024).

After analyzing the report presented by SEMED, it was found that there are 68 rural schools located in the Altamira region, 23 of which offer Early Childhood Education (preschool). From the information presented, it is possible to understand that, to some extent, the right to education of children in the region is being guaranteed, however there is still a lack of exclusive spaces for Early Childhood Education, since the number of kindergarten classes attended in this context is non-existent.

Of the 68 schools located in the peasant communities in Altamira, none offer classes for 3-year-olds. There is a need for vacancies for children at this stage of Early Childhood Education, but the government does not provide an offer at this stage for Rural Education. Altamira is a municipality that houses several communities with many families, formed by peasant workers and children who have the right to education adapted to their reality, taking into account the local culture.

Thinking about daycare for rural babies requires a deep knowledge of the local community, the economic production of the rural population, the demands of rural women and men, knowledge of ways to educate young children and, especially, respect for rural families (Silva, A.; Pasuch; Silva, J., 2012, p. 41).

In the absence of adequate spaces for preschool and/or its insufficiency, the classes are formed differently, according to the guidelines of the education departments to ensure a minimum number of students per grade, so the classes can be organized in three ways: multi-stage, multigrade and grading. The multi-stage consists of the combination of Early Childhood Education with Elementary School I. The multi-stage involves the junction of preschool classes I and II (4 and 5 years). Finally, the grade corresponds to preschool classes organized according to age group, with Maternal II (3 years and 11 months), pre-I (4 years and 11 months) and pre-II (5 years and 11 months).

In the territory of the municipality of Altamira, there are six peasant teaching units that offer Early Childhood Education in a segmented manner, with a total of 372 students enrolled. As for multigrade teaching, a total of 12 schools were identified, serving 169 students in these classes.

Five schools were identified, which offer the type of multi-stage education, in which 57 students are enrolled. In the end, no students were located in the Grades and Maternal categories.

After analyzing the data, it was observed that many schools offer Early Childhood Education in the field in multigrade classes, most of which are organized in several stages. There are 17 schools that group from pre-I to the 5th year of Elementary School I in a single room, with up to seven classes together. This makes it a challenge for teachers to deal with this diversity of students. According to Hage (2009, p. 3):

The studies we carried out reveal the difficulties that teachers face in the organization of pedagogical work and in the elaboration of planning in rural schools, when they are multigrade, a predominant situation of supply of the initial years of this level of education in the countryside. This is precisely because in these schools they work with many grades at the same time and the age group, interest and level of learning of students are very varied.

It is important to highlight that the merger between Early Childhood Education and Elementary School is not authorized according to Resolution No. 2/2008, however the Pedagogical Curriculum Proposal of Early Childhood Education of Campo de Altamira (Altamira, 2022, p. 95) emphasizes that this practice happens:

Due to the low adherence of students to early childhood education in certain communities and rural schools, the city considers uniting the different levels of education as a way to ensure that Early Childhood Education is offered to children living in the vicinity of their homes, thus avoiding having to move to more distant places.

Thus, it is possible to understand that, in order to implement the law that guarantees education for children enrolled in Early Childhood Education in peasant regions of the municipality of Altamira, it is crucial to organize the classes in a multigrade manner. This approach is seen as the only way found by SEMED to ensure learning in rural schools.

It is important to highlight that, according to the Coordination of Rural Education of the municipal network of Altamira, a limit of ten students was determined for the opening of Pre I and II classes on a regular basis. Any number below this limit will result in the need for multigrade classes.

Information obtained from SEMED indicates that, from 2004 to 2010, only three schools offered education for children in Rural, Water and Forest Education in Altamira. These institutions were located in Castelo de Sonho, Princesa do Xingu Rural Settlement and in the Vale Piauiense Community; in these institutions mentioned, teaching for children at an early age was offered on a multigrade basis.

From 2011 to 2016, five new rural, water and forest schools, located in communities such as Sol Nascente, Mixila, Serrinha and Quatro Bocas, started to offer Early Childhood Education in a multigrade manner. During this period, there was no specific regulation that determined the minimum number of students for the formation of classes in the multigrade modality, which resulted in the junction of classes in Garden I and II and, sometimes, even with students in the 1st year of Elementary School.

Between 2017 and 2020, two more new peasant communities received the implementation of Early Childhood Education in a multigrade format. These communities are *Dispensa I*, in the rural settlement of Assurini, and Itapuama, located in the rural settlement of Itapuama.

The increase in the number of institutions that began to make Early Childhood Education available on a multigrade basis occurred in the period from 2021 to 2024, according to information obtained from SEMED in the sector responsible for Rural, Water and Forest Education. In this context, it is important to highlight the significant increase in the number of rural, water and forest educational institutions that have started to provide Early Childhood Education services in the municipal network of Altamira in the last four years. In addition, it is worth mentioning that the implementation of Early Childhood Education in these regions contributed to the inclusion of children in the school environment of their own communities, thus avoiding travel on long and dangerous routes, a common practice previously, since several students from Garden II needed to travel to the pole schools where Early Childhood Education was offered.

4. Final Considerations

The initial stage of education, following the guidelines described in the DCNEI, requires appropriate places for these guidelines to be complied with. However, research carried out in educational establishments in Altamira reveals that the rooms are small and house an excessive number of children, with few resources to assist teachers in the development of their activities, in addition to the lack of adequate training for educators to act effectively in these environments.

As mentioned by A. Silva, Pasuch and J. Silva (2012, p. 148), “[...] it is necessary that the teacher has the ability to work with boys and girls at different times of development”. This combination with the multigrade scenario can have negative impacts on the

educational training of children living in rural areas, if the curriculum and all school members are not engaged. The curriculum needs an appreciation of nature. "[...] the natural/cultural multiplicity of local productions in the Amazonian context in which children live their childhoods, corroborating their invisibility" (Fraco; Ponce, 2022, p. 437).

In addition, it is evident the presence of didactic materials developed in the urban area being used routinely without highlighting the countryside as a space for living and human creation. In addition to the categories, we also present the conclusions, in this scenario, the importance of continuous and specialized training of educators working in Early Childhood Education in rural areas stands out, where the classes are formed by children of different ages. By the way, it is essential to provide pedagogical materials and suitable environments for rural children to experience their own routines, interact according to their reality and learn through experiences linked to nature and local traditions. It is essential that the school curriculum takes into account the cultural practices, the work of families and the ways of playing characteristic of these communities.

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