

## Reception of migrant and refugee children in early childhood education: a case study in the city of São Paulo

### ARTICLE

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### Abstract

This article aimed to investigate the reception of migrant and refugee children in a public school in São Paulo, in response to the significant increase of this group in Brazil, especially in 2019, when the country registered about 2.5 million migratory movements. Through interviews with teachers, coordinator and analysis of school documents, the study sought to answer the question about how this reception occurs in the public network. The results indicate that the welcoming initiatives are predominantly influenced by the individual practices of the teachers, despite the existence of an institutional project and continuing education on the subject. The study highlights the need for a more unified and structured approach to welcoming migrant and refugee children to schools.

**Keywords:** Host. Migrant children. Refugee. Early childhood education.

### Acolhimento de crianças migrantes e refugiadas na Educação Infantil: um estudo de caso na cidade de São Paulo

### Resumo

Este artigo teve como objetivo investigar o acolhimento de crianças migrantes e refugiadas em uma escola pública de São Paulo, em resposta ao aumento significativo desse grupo no Brasil, especialmente em 2019, quando o país registrou cerca de 2,5 milhões de movimentos migratórios. Por meio de entrevistas com duas professoras, uma coordenadora e a análise de documentos escolares, o estudo buscou investigar como ocorre o acolhimento dessas crianças na escola. Os resultados indicam que as iniciativas de acolhimento são predominantemente influenciadas pelas práticas individuais das professoras, apesar da existência de um projeto institucional e formações continuadas sobre o tema. O estudo destaca a necessidade de uma abordagem mais unificada e estruturada para o acolhimento de crianças migrantes e refugiadas nas escolas.

**Palavras-chave:** Acolhimento. Crianças migrantes. Refugiados. Educação Infantil.

## 1 Introduction

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In June 2021, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, in collaboration with the International Migration Observatory (OBMigra), reported that Brazil had recognized 60,000 people as refugees, with 26,000 of those recognized in 2020 alone. The majority of immigrants in the country are Latin Americans, with emphasis on Venezuelans and Haitians, who represent 60% of the 23,906 foreigners who settled in Brazil up until March 2021. Between 2011 and 2019, the country registered one million immigrants, mainly from Venezuela, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Haiti, driven by the global economic crisis and Brazil's social and economic growth in the 2000s. It is crucial to distinguish between refugees—who seek international protection due to persecution or threats—and migrants, a common confusion in the media. Refugees cannot return to their countries of origin without risk to life, and the denial of state protection can have severe consequences for their integrity and freedom. The legal frameworks for the reception of immigrants and refugees are established in international agreements and Brazilian human rights policies.

Brazil has generously welcomed migrants and refugees for decades, and has done so with respect for their rights and human dignity. In a world where refugees and foreigners are frequently stigmatized and marginalized due to racism and xenophobia, we have much to learn from the positive Brazilian experience regarding refugees (Jolie, 2010, p. 07).

The school must offer a welcoming posture through simple and fundamental actions in daily life, making the arrival of these students a little more peaceful. Therefore, the school needs to be a place that values, supports, and welcomes the diversity of each individual. Furthermore, this posture must embrace an education that is committed to critical interculturality (Walsh, 2007), which, in turn, is directly related to the decolonial perspective.

A reception that considers a decolonial approach presupposes, according to Fleury (2017, p. 183), the comprehension and confrontation of the "colonial matrix of power, which historically articulated the idea of 'race' as an instrument of social classification and control with the development of world capitalism (modern, colonial, Eurocentric), which began as part of the historical constitution of America."

Similar to Candau (2012, p. 52), the interculturality we advocate for is based on promoting "an education for the recognition of the 'other,' for dialogue between different social and cultural groups," committed to forming a democratic, diverse, and humane society. Intercultural education is essential for the reception and coexistence of multiple knowledges, especially for good coexistence among individuals in the school routine and the "dialogue between different sociocultural groups" (Candau, 2008, p. 54).

Given the above, the objective is to investigate reception actions for migrant and refugee children in the context of education. For this study, we opted for a qualitative approach of a descriptive-analytical nature. The article is divided into three parts. In the first, we discuss Early Childhood Education and the cultures of childhood, and present the objectives to be developed in this segment of education according to the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC). Next, we present and analyze the data collected from the field research. Finally, in the third part, we draw some considerations regarding the study conducted. It is worth mentioning that to answer the research question, we selected an Early Childhood Education school located in the municipality of São Paulo.

## **2 Early Childhood Education and the Cultures of Childhood**

Early Childhood Education is the first stage of basic education. It is at this stage that children can develop their autonomy and build bonds of friendship, learn to live with differences, and discover areas of knowledge. The BNCC defines Early Childhood Education as fundamental for the construction of each child's identity and subjectivity, and establishes six learning rights in this stage, summarized in action verbs: living together, playing, participating, exploring, expressing, and self-knowledge.

The BNCC advocates for and expects educational institutions to prioritize the development of respect, empathy, and the valuing of differences in children. To this end, it becomes essential to understand the children's cultural universe, their personal concerns, inquiries, spaces and groups of coexistence, fears, doubts, dreams, desires, and feelings. The concept of pedagogy of childhood adopted by Oliveira-Formosinho (2007) defends a

practice based on child participation. For the author, the pedagogy of childhood is constituted in spaces of interaction, guided by collaborative projects in circumstances that promote the participation of the entire school community—teachers, managers, parents, and, primarily, the children.

The cultures of childhood represent one of the privileged themes in the studies of the Sociology of Childhood, a recent field that has been structuring itself since the 1990s around some fundamental and basic principles, the main one being the conception of childhood as a social construction. Its starting point lies in an attempt to break away from traditional views of being a child, which reduce them to a merely static human being who will one day become an adult.

According to Corsaro (2011, p. 15), “[...] children are active and creative social agents who produce their own, exclusive children's cultures, while simultaneously contributing to the production of adult societies”. In the author's words, children's cultures manifest, therefore, as children, by interacting with adults and their peers, try to make sense of the world in which they are embedded. Consequently, children's cultures are not pre-existent to the children, nor do they function as something static that they carry with them to guide their behaviors. On the contrary, they constitute a produced and shared process, to the extent that children collectively participate in a social experience.

Thus, we can say that children are not part of a universe isolated from cultural and social life, but rather, they experience distinct childhoods depending on how they are structured in their experiences; at the same time, there is a dominant social conception of childhood that goes beyond the diversity of children's life realities. They develop within a context full of meanings offered through cultural life and experiences. This set of meanings is not only understood by the children, but is reproduced and recreated in their daily lives, conferring specific meanings upon them. Thus, when inserted into the cultural world that surrounds them, children are capable of re-elaborating and recreating this world, constituting themselves as social, historical, and cultural beings.

### **3 International and National Laws on the Access of Migrant and Refugee Children to School**

No. 9.474 (Brasil, 1997), the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (Brasil, 1990), the Migration Law (Brasil, 2017), and other international legal instruments are the documents to which the Brazilian government is a signatory. They legally protect the equal and free access of migrant and refugee children and youth to basic education throughout the national territory. Beyond mere access, we must observe whether, in practice, schools offer the basic conditions for these students to participate, compose, and effectively integrate into the discussions held in this context, thus honoring the rights granted to them by the legislation of national and international organizations.

According to the City Curriculum: Migrant Peoples, the initiative to elaborate a document that assists teachers in valuing migration in their daily practices is in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The document also includes reports from migrant and refugee individuals involved in the process of adaptation and reception in Brazil. It further highlights that the spontaneous association of migration with the experience of people seeking better job opportunities and decent living conditions is common, due to the significant number of people in mobility under these circumstances. There are, however, many other searches that deserve our attention and expand our knowledge about human mobility.

The act of migrating includes feelings, dreams, self-knowledge, personal dissatisfactions, but also objective accomplishments such as entering a university, seeking new employment, and providing better living conditions for oneself and one's family. On other paths, we find those who move to survive the unsuitable conditions imposed upon them and the threats to their own lives (São Paulo, SME/COPED, 2021, p. 15).

Migrant children are distributed across the thirteen Regional Education Directorates (DREs), with the DRE with the highest number of migrants being DRE Penha, followed by DRE Jaçanã/Tremembé and DRE Pirituba/Jaraguá. Although these three DREs together

account for more than half of the migrant enrollment number, totaling 4,204, the enrollments are distributed throughout the entire territory of the city of São Paulo.

In addition to the figures, data, concepts, etc., the Curriculum also includes testimonies from parents of children in the Municipal Education Network of São Paulo (RME-SP) who had successful experiences in the schools they attended; it also lists suggestions for videos, bibliographies, stories, documentaries, games, and activities for teachers to base their planning on. It presents all the laws that support migrants and refugees, as well as a support network including Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and non-school institutions for migrant and refugee peoples.

Upon analyzing the official documents of the city of São Paulo, we conclude that there is a support and reception network for people in situations of migration and refuge. However, the official documents of the SME-SP (Municipal Secretary of Education of São Paulo) make it clear that the School Units (UEs) are responsible for the planning, inclusion, and welcoming of these children.

## 4 The Welcoming of Migrant and Refugee Children in the Context of Early Childhood Education

For the purpose of this study, two teachers and the pedagogical coordinator were interviewed. To preserve the identity of the participants, we adopted fictitious names for each of them.

The first participant interviewed is named Maria, 46 years old, holding a degree in Pedagogy and a postgraduate qualification in musical education and arts. Maria has 25 years of experience in Early Childhood Education, 15 of which were in the public education network. In 2006, she joined the Municipal Education System (*Rede Municipal de Educação* – RME) and was shocked by the number of children per classroom; she sought further specialization by taking a postgraduate course in musical education and arts and various training courses offered by the RME. Upon arriving at the school that is the focus of the research, she was faced with the institution's reality: many migrant and refugee



children. Thus, she was surprised and interested in learning more about the history of those children.

According to Maria, in her first year at the school institution, she had only one refugee child, and her class was very restless. Thinking, then, about how to welcome and integrate this refugee child, she began incorporating music into her school routine. As a result, this refugee child started participating more in the proposed activities and integrated with the other classmates.

The teacher reported that in 2017, the music project was developed intuitively, through autonomous readings and research conducted by her. She also highlighted the importance of the families in the execution of this project, emphasizing the way they became involved, seeking to participate actively and collaboratively in all stages of the project. “How to make the families who arrive feel well, feel welcomed,” were the questions she pondered.

In light of these needs, they developed a way to welcome the children's families as well. According to the teacher, I felt that the family also needed this place in the school, they also needed to feel welcomed, they needed a listening ear, they needed to recognize themselves in the school.” Maria recounted that the school features signs with welcoming and greeting phrases in all the languages present. There is a “letter of intent” in the spoken languages, mentioning the objectives for that year, and there are also posters at the institution's entrance displaying the flags of all the countries present in the school community.

Subsequently, Maria informed that the school adopted the project “Curriculum of Childhood in the Context of Migration and Refuge” as its Special Action Project (PEA). The PEA is developed by the school units (UEs) of the RME and advances the priorities established in the City Curriculum and the Political-Pedagogical Project (PPP). Its goal is to refine educational practices and enhance the quality of education. According to the teacher, the PEA of the municipal Early Childhood Education school (EMEI) was conceived to address the community's diversity, which encompasses multiple childhoods. This initiative primarily aims to deepen knowledge regarding the migrant/refugee population –

an intrinsic characteristic that could not be overlooked – in order to understand them and, thus, provide qualified, ethical, and respectful care.

According to Maria, the project was born out of the necessity to look closely at the school community, and it is being developed across all classes. Also, according to the teacher, her class's thematic project is titled “Cultures of the World: the story of many voices.” From this project, multiple languages are interrelated; for instance, through the project, it is possible to research and learn about Brazilian songs and those from other nationalities present in the class. For the teacher, one of the practices that proved successful in her class was the “Family Circle” (*Roda da Família*). In the Family Circle, the children and a family member are invited to share their culture, games, songs, and typical dishes, relating them to multiple languages. The children participate in the interview with the invited family member and learn a song, story, or typical dish from the country of origin.

Bringing the culture of each child into the school environment is a powerful tool for the exchange of knowledge. Through the research of stories, music, games, and artists from the child's culture of origin, ethnic diversity can be worked on, thus emphasizing the importance of respect and the valuing of each culture, according to the teacher. As we delve into the theorists mentioned in this research, Maria's statement aligns with the assertion made by Oliveira-Formosinho (2007), whose understanding of the pedagogy of childhood is based on a praxis of child participation, viewing the child as an active subject in the classroom context. According to the author, the pedagogy of childhood is constituted in a space of interactions oriented towards collaborative projects in situations that foster the contribution not only of teachers but primarily of the children. For Oliveira-Formosinho (2007), aspects such as observation, listening, and negotiation are fundamental:

[...] to develop a pedagogical practice and thought process that avoids the inevitability of educating everyone as if they were a single entity. [...] The goal is to find a form of pedagogical differentiation that assumes heterogeneity and diversity as richness for situated learning and offers alternative ways of organizing the class and the school (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2007, p. 29).



In accordance with Sarmiento (2004), it is through the interactions with their peers and with adults that children experience the culture in which they are embedded, distinctly from adult culture. He further states that “[...] they convey specifically child forms of intelligibility, representation, and symbolization of the world” (Sarmiento, 2004, p. 12).

Thus, still according to the author, children construct their interactions, which will govern “conflict and cooperation relationships and which actualize, in their own way, the social, gender, ethnic, and cultural positions that each child integrates.” When questioned regarding her view on public policies for welcoming migrant and refugee families, Maria reported that there has already been significant progress in the welcoming of these migrant families.

The teacher cites that the City Curriculum: Migrant Peoples (*Curriculo da Cidade: povos migrantes*) was a major achievement for the school community and that training for teachers on this topic has been frequent overall. According to Maria, the migrant population was not taken into consideration; there was no concern with the welcoming, inclusion, and integration of this community. Maria commented that there is still a long road ahead, given that countless families are subjected to an undignified life, marked by exploitation and humiliation. She emphasizes the urgency of greater investment and public policies that are not only affirmative but also permanent, to confront this situation.

During the interview, when mentioning practices that did not work, the teacher stated that “for now, everything has worked out. I believe the reason is the listening to the children and families, who are always invited to evaluate, suggest, participate, criticize, and their participation is fundamental for the project to have meaning.”

It is also important to highlight that Maria mentions that listening, both to the children and the families, is the reason why her project's practices reflected such success. This receptive and affective listening creates space and promotes the child's protagonism. In the BNCC, listening is present in the fields of experience to be developed in Early Childhood Education; in the City Curriculum, the School Units (UEs) must provide space for listening to the gestures, gazes, and words of each child and family.

Dialoguing, considering, perceiving, observing, promoting autonomy: all these verbs converge with listening to children. By putting this listening into practice, we recognize each child as a full individual, capable and endowed with subjectivities that make them a legitimate social actor; in other words, the child is a subject of rights. Therefore, for any project to succeed, for the outlined objectives to be achieved, for there to be meaningful learning for every child, listening becomes an indispensable tool in any classroom.

According to Oliveira-Formosinho (2013):

Listening is a process of hearing the child about their collaboration in the process of co-construction of knowledge; that is, about their collaboration in the co-definition of their learning journey [...]. Listening must be a continuous process in the educational routine, a process of seeking knowledge about the children, their interests, relationships, motivations, knowledge, intentions, desires, life worlds, carried out within the context of the educational community, seeking an ethics of reciprocity. Thus, both listening and observation must serve as a safe harbor for contextualizing and projecting the educational action (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2013, p. 30).

The welcoming practices developed and applied in the EMEI environment were also a subject of discussion during our conversation. Maria reported that she believes a welcoming space, featuring the flags of the countries and a curriculum designed for the distinct childhoods, constitutes fundamental welcoming practices that have proved successful. The organization of the space also constitutes a concept of childhood. Horn (2004, p. 61) states that:

Early Childhood Education schools have the organization of environments as an important part of their pedagogical proposal. It translates the conceptions of the child, education, teaching and learning, as well as a worldview and a view of the human being held by the educator working in that setting.

Also, according to Oliveira-Formosinho (2013, p. 25):

A pedagogical space open to nature that is characterized by the communicative power of aesthetics, the ethical power of respect for each

personal and social identity, a safe and friendly refuge, open to play and learning, guarantees cultural learning.

Thus, by considering this welcoming space, the school fosters closer relationships with families and the community, respecting and valuing every social actor, whether they are a migrant, refugee, or Brazilian.

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Maria commented that they still need to improve the service in the school office (*secretaria*) and that it would be very beneficial if the professionals had knowledge of other languages. The teacher also mentioned that she misses having training on the theme of migration and refuge for other staff, such as school agents and cooks.

The second participant in our research is named Tereza. She is 47 years old, holds a degree in Pedagogy and postgraduate qualifications in psychopedagogy, neuropsychopedagogy, ludopedagogy, and multiple disabilities. Tereza reported that after graduating, she did not work in teaching but spent 4 years working in school administration at a Jewish school. During this same period, she took a public examination for a municipal public school teacher position and was awaiting the call, hoping to gain job stability and finally be able to teach.

In 2004, she was called to work as an adjunct teacher in elementary education. Until 2008, when there was a career restructuring, Tereza reported that there were two positions: the adjunct, a substitute serving the chosen teaching directorate; and the tenured, the titular classroom teacher. Tereza passed the selection process for adjunct teacher, and with the career restructuring, she moved to an elementary school in Rio Pequeno, where she served for three years as a designated pedagogical coordinator. In 2015, she began her work at a municipal Early Childhood Education school (EMEI), but in November of that same year, she had to take a two-year leave of absence to treat intestinal cancer.

The professional trajectory of Tereza, a teacher in Early Childhood Education, was marked by interruptions and challenges. In October 2018, the interviewee underwent a surgical intervention on her shoulder, a procedure that needed to be repeated in November of the subsequent year. These events, according to Tereza's account, resulted in the delay of her studies and the effective beginning of her teaching career. Considering the advent

of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, her first full academic year in Early Childhood Education was 2022. Thus, Tereza is classified, in the present study, as a teacher in the beginning of her career, with reduced experience in the context of Early Childhood Education. According to Tereza:

The neighborhoods of Brás, Bom Retiro, and 25 de Março are commercial districts that receive many migrants from various countries and states. As the school is located in this vicinity, we began to receive the children of these families. Bolivians, Haitians, Congolese, Venezuelans, Jamaicans, Syrians—the number of children increased every year [...] the learning rights, highlighted in the City Curriculum and the BNCC, ensure experimentation, observation, listening, speaking, and construction... these are the foundation of our PPP, PEA, and individual and school letters of intent.

When asked if any other work/project was developed with those children and their families before the existence of this project, Tereza answered that, as the demand emerged, the work was developed and improved. When asked about the thematic project developed with her class this year, Tereza answered the following:

From the beginning of the year, we have been working on issues related to the body: songs, games, silhouettes for drawing faces and clothes, then what "we have inside the body," and finally, the skeleton. We sing 'tumbalacatumba', 'cabeça-ombro-jelho-e-pé', and the song 'banho é bom'... then, leveraging this topic, we address hygiene, bathing, the importance of handwashing, and the use of masks. We also work on respect for oneself and others: learning to manage their own conflicts when they dislike a comment or game, not engaging in games that hurt or upset a friend, waiting their turn to speak, and playing with everyone, though we always mention that this is not an impediment to having best friends for life, right? What else... oh, this work is developed daily in conversation circles and during play in the park and classroom. All these activities are developed throughout the days; they are permanent and are part of the project. During this time, we worked with the book "Once upon a time, a checkerboard cat". The children identified with the cats' characteristics and chose their colors... then we built sculptures from magazines, they [the children] imagined themselves as the cat, drew themselves on the silhouette as the cat, and made tangrams. We are always thinking about who they are, how they are, and their friends. Then, in August, we will continue rewriting the book... this will go to the cultural exhibition. In August, we will do something similar,

using Monica's Gang (*Turma da Mônica*), but bringing each child's family to the school and subdividing the groups according to the characters.

When questioned about how she addresses ethnic diversity, Tereza reported that she uses readings, short films, and conversation circles. She also commented that "... I have Nigerian, Haitian, blonde, brunette, Bolivians (who resemble Asians due to their slanted eyes) [...] we look at our differences in color and shapes and our similarities." Given Tereza's response, we did not identify her specific pedagogical practice/action for addressing the theme of cultural diversity. The teacher needs to consider the child as a unique being in development, as a producer of knowledge and a social actor, taking into account the particularities of each individual, the age group, cultural diversity, values, beliefs, customs, ethnicities, among other aspects.

According to one of the fields of experience in the BNCC (2019):

The Self, the Other, and the Us – it is in the interaction with peers and with adults that children gradually constitute their own way of acting, feeling, and thinking, and discover that there are other ways of life, different people, with other points of view. In turn, in Early Childhood Education, it is necessary to create opportunities for children to come into contact with other social and cultural groups, other ways of life, different attitudes, techniques, and rituals of personal and group care, customs, celebrations, and narratives. In these experiences, they can expand the way they perceive themselves and others, value their identity, respect others, and recognize the differences that constitute us as human beings (Brasil, 2019, p. 40).

According to Tereza, the success of pedagogical practices resides in the emphasis and reinstatement of mutual respect among the individuals who comprise the school context. She mentioned that the children demonstrate gratitude toward the staff responsible for their meals and that, in moments of conflict, they are instructed to dialogue with each other. The teacher observed that children frequently demonstrate the capacity to resolve their own impasses through mediation and communication. However, the practices reported by Tereza and those verified during fieldwork observations did not show evident connections or actions directly aimed at the project "Curriculum of Childhood in the Context of Migration and Refuge" developed in the institution. This finding indicates a possible

dissociation between the formal project guidelines and the practical execution in the daily classroom routine.

We further observed that the teacher highly emphasizes the issue of respect, especially toward staff and teachers. Considering respect within the school context is part of any type of relationship in educational practice; we believe the teacher could leverage this theme to develop practices with her class that relate respect to difference and the ethnic diversity present in the classroom.

For Tereza, public policies are involved in the issue of welcoming migrant and refugee families in various ways. According to her:

I believe that the government officials, in every era and at every moment, welcome them in various ways. There are governments that are smooth, guaranteeing their rights through the speed of their documentation processes, and there are others that create difficulties, causing their situations to take longer to be resolved. Consequently, NGOs end up intervening and helping more than the governments, contributing even to the children's enrollments. We are an extremely welcoming country in situations of migration and refuge, but, at the same time, we are also very prejudiced. We still have a long way to go to deal with these policies.

When questioned about the welcoming strategies developed by the school that are proving positive, Tereza responded:

First, we break the language barriers at the parent welcoming. When they arrive and are well received, they manage to communicate safely, ensuring the enrollment is done properly. We also ask the children to help the new children, who sometimes don't understand our language well, so that they feel integrated. Children have something special; they don't have the barriers we have. They manage to communicate without speaking. They play, fight, sing, and build, regardless of the language they speak.

According to Tereza, the welcoming practices that could be improved in the school are directly related to the language spoken. According to her: "[...] to speak at least one other language to assist one another and accept that patience is necessary for them to



adapt to the school routine. The word is patience.” We are once again faced with the linguistic barrier already mentioned previously by the teacher Maria.

According to the City Curriculum: Migrant Peoples (*Currículo da Cidade: povos migrantes*) (Brasil, 2022), the spoken language represents more than just the way we communicate with other people. It is the bridge we establish with our origins and the way we understand ourselves. Language brings us a sense of belonging. And many migrant families wish to maintain their language at home, as a way to cultivate their own culture (Brasil, 2022, p. 50). Even with the intention of making the school a safe welcoming environment for migrant and refugee children and their families, we realize that there is still a long way to go, in addition to many improvements that need to be made. Beyond the linguistic barrier, which hinders the families' communication with the school, we note that for the welcoming of these children to occur, actions are necessary that go far beyond singing songs and listening to stories about the theme. Active listening is required, one that goes beyond the spoken language; recognizing the child as a social actor and producer of knowledge; giving voice to this child and recognizing them as an active part of their own development process.

Oliveira-Formosinho (2013) defines this type of pedagogical practice/action as pedagogy-in-participation focused on the actors who construct knowledge by participating in the learning processes. According to the author:

To develop Pedagogy-in-Participation as a process of sensitive listening, it becomes necessary to consider several dimensions of pedagogy: pedagogical spaces, materials, and times; the organization of groups; the quality of relationships and interactions; the observation, planning, and evaluation of learning; the activities and projects that bring life and experience to the co-construction of learning; pedagogical documentation that creates memory, learning, and meta-learning; and the involvement of parents, families, and communities (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2013, p. 24).

The third interviewee is the school's pedagogical coordinator. Rosa is 57 years old, holds degrees in Plastic Arts and Pedagogy and postgraduate qualifications in psychopedagogy and visual arts. Rosa shared that she has been a coordinator at schools

with a high demand for migrants and refugees since 2011, having been assigned to work at the EMEI in 2020.

When questioned about the nationalities present at the EMEI in 2022, Rosa responded:

A large part of the children served by the school are children of migrants coming from the Northeast and Southeast regions of the country, or children of immigrants from Angola, Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Congo, Lebanon, Peru, Paraguay, Haiti, Venezuela, Nigeria, and China. The vast majority of them work as domestic cleaners or in the clothing industry, in shops near the Largo da Concórdia, or in the informal economy. In the Brás region, there is a pronounced housing deficit, forcing families to rent rooms in the many boarding houses scattered throughout the neighborhood. Some of the children live in these rooms, in a precarious condition, sharing cubicles with other family members. There are also families living in "occupations", abandoned buildings in the city center used as housing. In a privileged situation are the families who live in two-bedroom apartments in the region, and also in COHAB housing complexes existing in the neighborhood. The parents' level of education rarely exceeds elementary school. Many of these children find the school to be the only space focused on their interests and needs, since the surrounding area presents serious security problems.

When questioned if she had previously had contact with discussions, training sessions, or guidelines regarding the welcoming and adaptation of children in situations of refuge or migration, Rosa affirmed that she had, through training offered by the SME-SP, in partnership with the NGOs Repórter Brasil and the Social Service of Commerce (SESC), and currently, the City Curriculum: Migrant Peoples (*Currículo da Cidade: povos migrantes*). Regarding the coordinator's contact with the families of children in situations of migration or refuge, Rosa commented that this contact occurs during parents' meetings, Family Day, the São Paulo Early Childhood Education Quality Index (IQEIP), and individual meetings. Rosa also stated that one of the greatest challenges in coordinating a school with so many migrant and refugee families lies in the issue of language, customs, culture, and religions that differ from those of Brazilians. When questioned about the welcoming actions that have proved successful at the EMEI, Rosa responded the following:

In the first meetings and visits to the school, we seek to welcome them with greetings in all languages, explain the entire functioning of the school, we place the flags at the school entrance, we translate messages through

WhatsApp into the native language of each foreigner, and the teachers individually do this in the classroom and in conversations.

Regarding the welcoming actions that could be improved, Rosa reported that there could be typical cultural festivals in the school involving the entire school community, where the typical foods, dances, folklore, and customs of the migrant and refugee families could be worked on and valued.

Rosa concludes by stating that there is very good work being done in Brazil with migrant and refugee peoples, but that there is still room for improvement. She further emphasized the work of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the National Committee for Refugees (CONARE), and the importance of NGOs like Missão Paz, Cáritas, and Repórter Brasil, which form a support network alongside the school to provide the necessary support to these families. Given the coordinator's responses, we perceive a lack of support from the public sector in guiding the teachers. She emphasized the importance of the work of the NGOs and mentioned very little about public administration regarding immigration policy, as we observe in the following statement:

Here [in Brazil], the NGOs play a very important role, you know? They do very good work... it is there that families receive the first guidelines for enrolling children in school, some offer Portuguese language classes for adults, the NGOs help these families a lot.

One of the points that became evident in the interviews conducted with the teachers was the lack of training in a second language. In contrast, in the interview conducted with the coordinator, the issue of the linguistic barrier is not mentioned by Rosa as one of the welcoming actions that could be improved at the school. Given what was observed, we perceive that contact with families happens much more through the teachers than through the school coordination itself; perhaps this is why the training of teachers and staff in a second language is not so urgent for the coordinator.

Considering the high demand for migrant and refugee children that the school receives annually, the role of public policies is still insufficient regarding training. Staff, teachers, and administrators need to use technological resources to communicate with

family members of children who do not speak the Portuguese language. We then question: what is the role of the public sector in the face of issues like these? What importance does the State truly give to migrants and refugees, given that NGOs play a fundamental role in the issue of document regularization, insertion into the labor market, and referring children to schools? Is the mere elaboration of a special curriculum for the education of migrants and refugees sufficient for them to feel like an integral part of the school and welcomed in the school institutions? Additionally, critical challenges are identified, such as the insufficient preparation of future professionals (undergraduate students from various teacher training courses) to work in socio- and linguistically complex scenarios. Added to this is the lack of guidance from state agencies to schools that welcome children from families who do not speak or do not understand the Portuguese language. Therefore, thinking about a welcoming approach that qualifies the educational work with migrant and refugee children presupposes a systemic view of the multiple factors and actors involved in this process.

## 5 Final Considerations

We began this research with a central question: what are the welcoming actions that the school develops with migrant and refugee children in the context of Early Childhood Education? The approach to the research theme was initially driven by the large number of news reports and accounts seen in the media, especially in the last two years, where the number of migrants and refugees has significantly increased worldwide.

Migration and refuge are not a recent phenomenon in Brazil. Therefore, in the present study, we sought to analyze data collected from the creation of the Foreigner Statute (Law No. 6.815/1980), revoked in 2017 by the New Migration Law (Law No. 13.445/2017), up until the year 2020.

We confirmed through the analysis and reading of materials and reports developed by the OBMigra, UNHCR, and CONARE that the number of migrants and refugees in Brazil has grown significantly in the last ten years.

The analysis of the official documents of the municipality of São Paulo indicates that, on the theoretical level, the welcoming policy exists, evidenced by the elaboration of the City Curriculum: Migrant Peoples by the Municipal Secretary of Education (SME-SP). However, the fieldwork revealed a significant discrepancy between the norm and the execution. Dialogue with the coordinator and teachers of the selected EMEI confirmed that the welcoming, in practice, is sustained primarily by the goodwill, commitment, and creativity of the educators. These educators actively seek alternatives to provide an effective and welcoming reception to the children and their families. It is evident, therefore, that the effectiveness of the welcoming depends much more on the individual initiative and dedication of the professionals than on the strengthening and concrete implementation of the official policies aimed at this purpose.

In the teachers' own statements, we noted the urgency of a second language as support for serving families who do not yet speak Portuguese, as demonstrated in the following accounts: Question: what welcoming strategies could be improved? Teacher Maria: "Ah, it would be great if we had language courses. I feel there's a lack of training for the other staff, like school agents, cooks... on this theme." Teacher Tereza: "For us to speak at least one other language to help one another and accept that patience is necessary for them to adapt to our routine." We therefore consider that public policies still need to be improved regarding the welcoming, integration, and insertion of migrant and refugee families into society and their children into schools, especially in Early Childhood Education, where there is a large percentage of children aged zero to six in situations of migration or refuge who are outside of school.

The elaboration of an official document governing the rights of migrants and refugees is of little value if it is not put into practice. Training on this theme is necessary not only for teachers and administrators but for the entire school community involved in the process of welcoming these children. Training courses and language courses for school secretaries and teachers who have migrant or refugee children in their classes are necessary. There is a long road ahead. Much has already been done, but we conclude, by comparing theory with practice, that there is still much to be refined.

We observe a great concern on the part of the teachers to welcome not only the children in situations of migration and refuge but also their families. Maria's actions are focused on the interaction between the children and families, for the welcoming and integration of everyone, not only in the school space but in the community as a whole. As previously reported, the practices developed by Teacher Maria align with what Oliveira-Formosinho (2013) calls pedagogy-in-participation, in which the pedagogical practice is democratic and constructed by all:

Democracy is at the heart of the beliefs of Pedagogy-in-Participation, because it incorporates into its mission the promotion of equality for all and the inclusion of all diversities. This implies assuming social responsibility for children and families and promoting educational success as an instance of education for diversity (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2013, p. 11).

Thus, based on what has been analyzed, we can state that the actions the school develops for the welcoming of migrant or refugee children are focused more on the teachers' practices than on the school itself. Even though there is an institutional project whose theme is worked on and developed, and even though continuing education on the theme occurs, we perceive, by observing the two teachers, that each professional engages with the project in a distinct way.

May the public policies for welcoming children in situations of migration or refuge understand the necessity of a careful gaze upon childhood; may actions be created and developed to address the great demand found in schools, and; may the results presented here motivate new research on migration and refuge in Early Childhood Education.

In recent years, Brazil has been one of the countries that meet the requirements of the 1951 Geneva Convention and the other legal frameworks dedicated to the welcoming and protection of migrants. However, there is still much to be done, especially in the field of education. One of the results of the enrollment of a foreign child in school is the change in educational culture.



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