

# BETWEEN THE POLITICS OF QUALITY AND THE QUALITY OF PRACTICES

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## ABSTRACT

*This article compares the different courses of the debate on and the policies of quality evaluation in Early Childhood Education and other basic education stages, demonstrating that until recently their evolution presented very distinct traits. However, it highlights that lately this trend seems to have changed considering the increasing pressure to introduce in the Early Childhood Education network some external assessment systems in order to follow some models that are already implemented in other levels of the education system. Based on this evidence, the article discusses some of the dilemmas and challenges that Early Childhood Education policies and programs have to face related to evaluations, both in view of its quality assessment as well as its impact on children's school progress upon the continuation of their education.*

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION • ASSESSMENT • EDUCATION QUALITY  
• EDUCATION POLICY

...y para nosotros se habrá acabado esa tremenda maldición de no ver nada sin ser ciegos; no oír nada sin ser sordos; de no poder hablar sin ser mudos, ... por eso levantamos nuestra gran escuela... (Cipriano Tiñini, *Latin American peasant*, apud Rodríguez Balzán; Aguirre Ledezma, 2004, p. 11)

**C**IPRIANO SPEAKS FOR THE SAKE OF MANY. Throughout all Latin America, popular movements not only fought and still fight in order to have access to education, so often promised and for long denied, but also constructed and organized their own schools and day care centers considering the absence or limited supply of public education and care, or due to resistance to an education with which they did not identify.

"... and for us this terrible curse being able to see anything despite our non-blindness, of not being able to hear anything despite our nondeafness, and of not being able to say anything despite our non-dumblness shall be over... this is why we built up our great school..."

<sup>1</sup> In Brazil, Early Childhood Education is defined as the first level of Basic Education; it includes Crèches (Day Care Centers) for children aged from 0 to 3 and preschools for 4 and 5 years old children.

<sup>2</sup> Partially based on a document presented at the meeting of the Consejo de Educación de Adultos de América Latina - CEAAL -, in Bolivia, in 2003 (CAMPOS, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay, the Southern countries of the continent, have virtually universalized

In this article, the broad Latin American context is the starting point to introduce the evolution of the debate on Early Childhood Education and Care quality in Brazil. Next, the differences between the progress of quality policies directed to the other levels of education and those directed to the Early Childhood Education are discussed. Finally we present some of the dilemmas that have been strained in the struggle between the proposed quality measurements for day care centers and preschools,<sup>1</sup> raised by different fields of knowledge and interest groups.

## THE DISCOURSE ON EDUCATION QUALITY DISPLACES THE STRUGGLE FOR ACCESS TO EDUCATION<sup>2</sup>

Historically, in most Latin American countries<sup>3</sup> school systems contributed to reproduce the social structure much more through an exclusion process than through internal mechanisms of inequality reinforcement; this finding also applies to many places

of the region, and it is most heavily felt by marginalized groups of population in rural areas and in poor outskirts of large cities.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that in recent decades there has been a significant expansion of enrollments in almost all countries, especially in primary and secondary schools and also at the preschool level. In this context, there is a shift of concerns from access democratization to education quality, which is a natural outcome of the growing presence in public schools of children, adolescents, and young adults coming from the poorest stratum.

The horizontal and vertical expansion of the school systems reflect the inequality characteristics of society: it is not the same education that reaches all, or almost all; furthermore, the education provided not always meets the demands and needs of the various social, cultural, and ethnic groups.

In analyzing quality, it is important not to overlook this perspective; as Juan Casassus comments on the education reforms of the 1990s: “upon replacing the discourses and policies of equal opportunities with the quality discourse and policy”, quality and equality issues have been dissociated (2002, p. 50).

Reforms also accounted for the implementation of national and international systems of learning assessment measured by tests that were applied to students of primary and secondary schools, providing a large amount of data and allowing comparisons between schools, cities, regions, and countries. Education quality started to be defined mainly by those indicators that were based on criteria that have gained wide public legitimacy and thus reaffirmed the social differences among students: private school students usually get better results than those enrolled in public schools (universities being exceptions: in them the signal reverses); those who dwell in more developed regions achieve better results than the students originally coming from poorer regions, especially rural areas; the discriminated ethnic and racial groups have worse outcomes than any others.

Thus, it seems that education reforms, albeit some common starting points – the commitments of Jomtien conference, the concerns about changes in the economics and the production system –, by focusing on very different realities, on social groups that enjoy very different living conditions and power exercising possibilities, on societies profoundly divided in economic, social, political, and cultural terms, not always produced results that could lead to a greater democratization of access to education and to a better response of the school to the needs of various segments of population.

primary school teaching way before others at the beginning of the 20th Century.

<sup>4</sup> Casassus (2002) remembers that Latin America and the Caribbean correspond to that region of the world that has the highest income inequality; the world highest Gini indexes are located in Latin America. Comparing the average schooling of the groups located at the extremes of the income pyramid, he shows that “on average in the region, the richest 10% get four times more education than the poorest 10%” (p. 39).

Common to all these contradictions, the gap between the goals of the reforms, and the availability of public resources to finance education made quality become a central issue when compared with the previous emphasis on expanding education opportunities. The distance between the goals of the reforms and the economic priorities reinforced the notion of quality based on management efficiency. Enhanced competition for public resources led to the betterment of some levels and teaching modalities to the detriment of others, to the use of outsourcing and privatization, to focalization instead of universalization, and to the decentralization of education services without the guarantee of material and human resources and often lacking political conditions to exercise social control.

However, it is important to recognize that the reforms, with all their limitations and contradictions, had the merit of including education in the political agenda and of giving social visibility to subject matters that previously were restricted to the specific field of the educators. These reforms, maybe failing to achieve consensus, gave voice to alternative notions, to resistance, to dissent. Data generated by centralized evaluation systems enabled some studies that made public the learning inequalities by students with different social backgrounds, reflecting discriminatory processes and reinforcing inequalities that still exist in school, now apparently open to all.

Taking into account this broader perspective, reflecting on education quality in this part of the world implies in reflecting on the inequality of education opportunities, social exclusion experienced inside and outside school, and the contradictions between economic goals and education policy targets. It implies establishing the proper place of all these discourses on quality, identifying who is speaking and from which stance. And it also implies in recognizing the existence of conflicts and disputes in defining what exactly quality in education means.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF QUALITY CONCEPTIONS ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOLLOWED ITS OWN COURSE**

The origin of the debate on Early Childhood Education quality, it can be said, was marked by the psychological approach. In the beginning the concern with the effects of the separation of mother and child led to a questioning of the child care institution (crèches), which was primarily focused on the emotional aspects of child development. In a second moment, from the 1960s on, the concerns

with the effects of the cultural deprivation theories led to a shift of focus on the child's cognitive development aiming their future performance in primary school. Psychological test applications were encouraged and their results considered positive in some early intervention experiences, particularly in the United States. These have strengthened the arguments in favor of preschool education expansion.

In Brazil those positions based on the cultural deprivation theory had great impact over the social welfare and education policies during the 1970s and 1980s. For example, the so-called "children parks"<sup>5</sup> of São Paulo city, which since the 1930s were used by children as young as four-year-old and favored outdoor activities, began to privilege formal activities, which prepared children for later alphabetization. Several education compensation programs for children belonging to low-income families were implemented during the military regime.<sup>6</sup> Most of these programs were low cost, employed low educated adults and represented a kind of "poor education for the poor" type of model.

The ongoing debate led to more profound developmental psychology approaches thus contributing for the design of more integrated notions of quality that seek a greater balance between the school preparation emphasis and the respect for the developmental stage of the child. The texts, supporting materials, videos, and tools released by the National Association for Early Childhood Education – NAEYC, from the United States, based on the concept of *Developmental Appropriated Practices* – DAP – and in the *High Scope* curriculum are very representative for this stage.

The notion of appropriate practices for development, published by NAEYC (BREDEKAMP, 1987), summarizes and makes real an education approach that is based on the characteristics and needs of each stage of child development, aged 0-8, therefore also including the early years of elementary school. Emerging from the description of appropriate and inappropriate practices, the pedagogic model values free play, children's initiative, emotional and affectionate aspects, positive interaction between adults and children, individual work as well as work in small groups; thus it corresponds to an active pedagogic model and defends a development notion that integrates emotional, cognitive, physical, and social aspects.

According to Julia Oliveira-Formosinho (1998), *High Scope* curriculum "lies within an Early Childhood Education perspective based on Developmental Psychology". It was gradually developed based on "reasoning over action, in several levels: of the child, of the educator, of the researcher, as well as of the interaction of all of

5 The "parques infantis" (children's parks) were early childhood centers for children from 4 to 12 years old, from São Paulo working class neighborhoods, that received children before the age of school and school aged children in after school programs. They were transformed in preschool centers in years 1970's.

6 The last military regime in Brazil was in place from 1964 through 1988, when a new Constitution was approved.

them, aiming the construction of the act of educating” (OLIVEIRA-FORMOSINHO, 1998, p. 145). It adopts some assumptions that are very close to the NAEYC model. This curriculum has gone through several phases and it is mainly being used in the preschool.

Several studies on the impact that preschool programs have on the learning process of children throughout their education years examined the children who finished programs that adopted these guidelines. One of the most renowned of them, the *Perry project*,<sup>7</sup> developed in the context of Compensatory Education Movement of the 1960s, is really equivalent to the first development phase of the *High Scope* curriculum (OLIVEIRA-FORMOSINHO, 1998, p. 145-146).

Thus, since then, Early Childhood Education was considered as a positive benefit for the student, for the future citizen and for society. The same expectation did not apply equally to the day care center (*crèche*). A review of the English, Latin American, and Brazilian literature held in 1997 commented that while research on the day care programs brought about questions on their potential negative effects on child development, researches on preschool were testing hypotheses on its positive effects on child’s future schooling (CAMPOS, 1997, p. 120).

In 1991, however, a new, much more informed perspective in terms of political, social, and cultural considerations appears in the European Union in a paper called *Quality in services for young children: a discussion paper* (BALAGEUR; MESTRES; PENN, 1992) which has been written by members of the European Commission Equal Opportunities Unit. This commission had been created in 1986 as part of the *Program for equal opportunities* at the European Union that sought to encourage means to ensure equal participation of women and other discriminated groups in society (MOSS, 2002). The availability of good quality care for young children before compulsory and supplementary education in the elementary school was raised to social and political connotations, in the sense that it recognized families and children afforded rights. The political project of social democracy reinforced the notion of a more integrated quality, more attentive to issues such as social inequality and gender and, at the same time, geared to the needs of young children.

During a presentation held in Brazil in 2000, Peter Moss described the evolution of this approach from its inception to the proposed quality objectives for the European Union (EUROPEAN COMMISSION CHILDCARE NETWORK, 1996). In the document quality notion was characterized as follows:

<sup>7</sup> *Perry project* is still widely quoted, mainly by economists interested in cost-benefit calculations, considering the children who finished this program and are accompanied by research into adulthood.

- quality is a relative concept, based on values and beliefs;
- quality definition is a process and it is important in itself, providing opportunities to share, discuss, and understand values, ideas, knowledge, and experience;
- the process should be participatory and democratic, engaging different groups that include children, parents, relatives and professionals working in services;
- sometimes necessities, perspectives, and values of these groups may differ;
- quality definition should be seen as a dynamic and ongoing process, implying regular reviews and never reaching a final, 'objective' statement. (MOSS, 2002, p. 20-21)

Later, Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) developed a critical theoretical approach that problematized pedagogical proposals and quality criteria informed by a kind of rationale that was identified as western modern. There is an important recognition of the tension between the definition of quality criteria based on universal knowledge, grounded on a modern scientific tradition, and the appreciation of diverse cultural perspectives on the meaning and the place of the social education for young children. The author's arguments highlight the linkage of certain initiatives undertaken for the sake of education quality to the economic objectives guided by market interests. The proposed alternative, inspired by the experience of Reggio Emilia, Italy, is to understand the institution of Early Childhood Education as a forum for debates and reflections allowing a collective production of meaning on the work developed with and for children.

Similarly, Anna Bondioli summarizes the nature of the quality of service from the perspective of the "very first" childhood educators of the Emilia Romagna region, in Italy, in which the debate on quality is part of participatory processes of self-evaluation:

- quality has a transactional nature;
- quality has a participatory nature;
- quality has a self-reflexive nature;
- quality has a contextual and plural nature;
- quality is a process;
- quality has a transformative nature. (2004, p. 13-14)

Helen Penn (2011) examines quality from a perspective that takes into account differences in terms of conditions and strategies found in several parts of the world. This British author aims to take a step forward in relation to the postmodern criticism of Dahlberg,

Moss, and Pence (1999). She endorses several points of their approach – the importance of cultural context, the ethnocentrism present in the dominant notions of the developed Western countries – but recognizes the relevance of the concern with quality in unequal societies, in which opportunities and risks do not reach everyone the same way. In this sense, one can say that she adopts a position that is closer to social democracy, prioritizing the role of the State and placing the debate in a broader social and political context.

By the end of her book, Penn says that governments define service quality for young children, not only for what they did and do, but also for what they omit. She emphasizes that

What matters also is an understanding of how early childhood services are nested in a wider set of social concerns over education, health, poverty and attempts to reconcile work and family life. [...] To achieve high-quality ECEC services requires adequate legislation, target setting, regard for human resources and the means of ensuring access for the most disadvantaged children, in a system which is subject to continuous monitoring and review and which has funding fit for purpose. (PENN, 2011, p. 210)

In Brazil, one might say, a singular story that evolved from the context of the post-dictatorship democratization process has benefited from some of these European positions several times.

The valorization of the *crèche* and the overcoming of the social stigma associated with this type of care – until then seen as a “lesser evil” for families and mothers considered unable to educate their young children – happen under the influence of the feminist movement in the context of the urban social movements from the end of the 1970s on. At first, day care centers were considered as a right of the women workers; soon after, during the transition to a democratic regime, the urban social movements began to worry about the quality of the rendered services, bringing the child to the foreground. To a certain extent, this concern was shared by popular community leaders, who sought to organize their community day care centers in their own neighborhoods. Many experiences assisting popular groups were developed by non-governmental organizations that were formed during this process, bringing together activists and professionals.

As an outcome from the interaction of these groups with experts and new local government teams, with the support of the Ministry of Education, a document on quality of early childhood services was prepared – *Criteria for care in crèches that respect the*

*fundamental rights of children* – and widely disclosed in the country (CAMPOS; ROSEMBERG, 1995). In this document the inspiration coming from the first European Network document (BALAGEUR; MESTRES; PENN, 1992) is evident; along with a concern in using simple language, with concrete examples from everyday practices in order to facilitate communication with the teams in charge in the municipalities, non-governmental organizations, community organizations and teams units, which basically, at the time, consisted of personnel with little schooling or without specialized training.

Articulations of these social actors, reinforced by those movements that fought for children and adolescent's human rights, were able to secure the inclusion of the crèches into the education system in the new Constitution of 1988, along with the preschool education, by defining early childhood education as the first stage of basic education. The General Law of Education, enacted in 1996, preserved this structure and introduced the objective of seeking graduation level also for day care centers and preschool's teachers. To the municipalities it was assigned the primary responsibility of providing vacancies for this stage of education.

Despite the difficulties and contradictions that came and are still coming along with the transition of the crèches to the education sector, they are slowly finding their own space within the municipal school networks. Several measurements have contributed for this purpose: public funding foreseen in the Basic Education Funding System – Fundeb; programs of ongoing education; the inclusion of the nursery school in the federal programs of school lunch, distribution of pedagogical material and children's books.

Between 1998 and 2008, country-wide enrollment rates in day care centers (crèches) doubled, reaching 18% this year; in the preschool, the percentage of children aged 4 to 6 rose from 40% to 80%, including those enrolled in elementary school. However, access to Early Childhood Education does not happen in an equal manner for the population as a whole: more developed regions present higher enrollment rates than the others; urban areas, much higher rates than rural; children in low *per capita* income families show significantly lower enrollment rates, as well as non-white children.

A review of the empirical studies on quality of the Early Childhood Education institutions, published in the country between 1996 and 2003, ranked the biggest problems one could find based on the following topics: professional training, pedagogical and curriculum proposals, operating conditions and

the routine of education practices, relationship with families. The findings show that:

In the four issues surveyed, conditions in day care centers are always most precarious, both regarding staff training and material infrastructure, with rigid routines almost exclusively based on actions oriented toward food intake, hygiene, and restraint of children. In comparison, conditions observed in preschools are better as regards staff training and material infrastructure, but routines are equally not very flexible and focused on school activities. In the two types of institutions there are significant difficulties in communication with families, which are usually seen in a negative and biased way by part of day care center and preschool staffs. (CAMPOS; FULLGRAF; WIGGERS, 2006, p. 117-118)

As for the training of teachers, the survey shows that the examined researches indicate the following:

...challenges to be addressed are due to the fact that there are still many educators without the minimum necessary training and schooling required by the new legislation, as well as many education courses which do not meet the training needs for early childhood education. (CAMPOS; FULLGRAF; WIGGERS, 2006, p. 118)

Two documents elaborated by the Education Committee of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – OECD, which gathers representatives of developed countries, provide a broad overview of the policies and programs adopted by these countries in Early Childhood Education. The first document identified eight key elements to ensure the success of policies and education services, as well as care for young children:

- A systemic and integrated approach to ECEC<sup>8</sup> policy.
- A strong and equal partnership with the education system.
- A universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support.
- Substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure.
- A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance.
- Appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision.
- Systematic attention to data collection and monitoring.

8

ECEC, meaning Early Childhood Education and Care, is the expression used in these documents for services aimed at children from 0 to 6 years old that provide education and care.

- A stable framework and a long-term agenda for research and evaluation. (OECD, 2006, p. 3-4)

On the following document, coordinated by John Bennett, in collaboration with Collette Tayler, these key elements were reviewed. After careful analysis of the situation and the policies adopted in each country, ten areas for consideration by governments were identified, regarding their policies for education and care of young children:

- To attend to the social context of early childhood development.
- To place well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child's agency and natural learning strategies.
- To create the governance structures necessary for system accountability and quality assurance.
- To develop with the stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all ECEC services.
- To base public funding estimates for ECEC on achieving quality pedagogical goals.
- To reduce child poverty and exclusion through upstream fiscal, social, and labour policies, and to increase resources within universal programmes for children with diverse learning rights.
- To encourage family and community involvement in early childhood services.
- To improve the working conditions and professional education of ECEC staff.
- To provide freedom, funding and support to early childhood services.
- To aspire to ECEC systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy. (OECD, 2006, p. 4)

These recommendations emerged from data collected on various countries and the challenges and contradictions identified in several education and care situations examined in the report. It must be taken into consideration that the organization of services in early childhood, according to OECD, shows many differences between the focused countries: many of them separate the education of children aged 2-3 onwards from the crèches for the group age closer to birth, which is under the responsibility of other social policy sectors; in some countries parental leave is longer, prompting parents to take care of their babies in the first year of life or more; in other cases, changes were introduced to group all the services in the education field. The funding methods also vary and part of the

cost of childcare often falls on families. In countries like the U.S. and the U.K., an important part of the service is up to the market, either all costs falling onto households, or a combination with the use of vouchers or some other type of subsidy.

If Brazil were included in this scenario, some assumptions could be made. In the case of legislation that included the age group 0 to 6 in the education area, transferring the crèche for 0 to 3 from the social service area, with the provision of public funding and establishing the same professional education for the staff in crèches and preschools, the country would be in a much more favorable situation than many of those countries examined by OECD study. In regards to enrolment rates by age, although most children aged 4-5 still do not have access to preschool in Brazil, the enrolment rates already achieved<sup>9</sup> would not be among the worst ones recorded in that survey (OECD, 2006, p. 74-82).

The greatest contrasts would have to be sought on issues related to social safety nets in which nursery school policies fit as well as the quality indexes achieved by the services.

## THE STAGE OF THE DEBATE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION QUALITY IN BRAZIL

From the 1990s on, large-scale evaluation systems, by which schools are evaluated after the results of their students at assessments tests, have been multiplied in Latin America in the context of the education reforms introduced in several countries in the region (CASASSUS, 2002). In Brazil, this process has been intensified with a huge public repercussion: in a country considered “emerging” from the economic point of view, it became difficult to accept a situation in which education is placed in one of the last positions in the Program for International Student Assessment – PISA.

Until recently, the Early Childhood Education was kept aside of this discussion and, in a certain way, went through a divergent path, seeking to adopt more participatory procedures, with greater emphasis on collaboration rather than competition.

With support from the National Campaign for the Right to Education and Early Childhood Education Inter-forums Movement respectively articulating a range of international and local mobilizations, a survey was conducted to hear children, teachers, staff, parents, and community members close to 53 crèches and preschools of four states in different regions of the country, regarding their views on the quality of Early Childhood Education. This query collected a material that can be considered

<sup>9</sup>

Around 20% for 0 to 3 and 80% for 4 and 5 years old children in the year 2010.

as an important support in setting quality criteria for this stage of education (CAMPOS; COELHO; CRUZ, 2006).

The next step, the instrument *Indicators of Quality in Early Childhood Education*, was prepared to be used in self-evaluation of Early Childhood Education centers; it was published by the Ministry of Education, with a circulation of over 200,000 copies, freely distributed throughout the country to public crèches and preschools (BRASIL, 2009). A survey on its receptivity found that out of 5,565 Brazilian municipalities half of them acknowledged the document arrival and of these 30% said they used it in one way or another. These two experiences were conducted through a participatory process, which included experts and representatives of various civil society organizations.

Alongside this process, as *Starting strong II* report recognizes, “A new and powerful public discourse on early learning has emerged from the United States, encouraging early childhood professionals to support school learning more effectively” (OECD, 2006, p. 167). One of the names that has driven this trend is the economist and Nobel laureate James Heckman (LESEMAN, 2009). His arguments are based on cost and benefit analysis as well as on neuroscience findings, which point to the need for early interventions with children in the years immediately after birth. As it might be expected, this approach has got great response from economists and medicine related experts. Heckman came to Brazil and groups of Brazilian economists are participating in joint projects with the American teams. This integration has strengthened some research and intervention projects that make use of developmental tests applied to very young children in crèches and calculate the minimum cost necessary to improve these results (BARROS et al., 2011).

These initiatives have caused a great controversy in the education field. Indeed, these projects bypass the existing legislation and the debates on quality that have been developing in Early Childhood Education. But it has to be recognized that other factors are also influencing the pressure for evaluation of Early Childhood Education quality. To the extent that services have expanded significantly for children over 4, the demand for vacancies for younger children has grown and gained a huge public and political visibility. The pressure on municipalities to increase the supply of vacancies, mainly in large cities, is increasing.

At the same time, concern about the quality of care is justified. Its growing demand may lead to the necessity of caring for very young children in nursery schools, for long hours daily, with no guarantee of minimum quality conditions, which can impair their development and disregard their rights.

In 2009 and 2010, a survey on the quality of Early Childhood Education was conducted and promoted by the Ministry of Education with funding from the Interamerican Development Bank – IDB. The study evaluated a proportional sample of 150 Early Childhood Education centers in six state capitals, located in five geographic regions of the country, including public, private, and private with some state support institutions. The research used the environment observation scale for age groups corresponding to day care centers and preschools, *Infant/toddler environment rating scale: revised edition – ITERS-R* (HARMS; CRYER; CLIFFORD, 2003) and *Early childhood environment rating scale: revised edition – ECERS-R* (HARMS; CLIFFORD; CRYER, 1998). Teachers, pedagogic coordinators, and directors of the visited units were also interviewed.

On average, the results indicated that institutions had either insufficient or in some of the evaluated aspects very low scores (CAMPOS, 2010; CAMPOS et al., 2011). Teachers showed that to some extent they are aware of some of these problems, many of which are outcomes of the policies adopted in their municipalities. However, their responses suggest they would not be able to take steps alone in order to act over the critical points of the study. One possible conclusion is that in order to get quality improvements it would require external monitoring and pedagogical assistance, which would support teams on examining their practices in a more systematic manner helping them to find ways to overcome the proven deficiencies. If self-assessment is an important step toward this aim, it seems that external evaluations are still necessary to indicate critical points in routines and practices adopted in everyday work with children.

The disclosure of this study provoked mixed reactions as some groups reject any external evaluation on the grounds that the maturation of internal teams and collective consideration on their practice is the only way to improve the quality of work with young children.

At the other extreme, evaluation experts with know-how in other phases of education as well as economists concerned with the cost-benefit analysis have been proposing the implementation of individual assessment also in Early Childhood Education. New legislation on compulsory education for children aged 4 onward contributed to this growing interest as well as concerns about the high levels of functional illiteracy evidenced among students of primary and secondary education.

Most recently, those programs that focus on literacy “at the right age”, which recommend a national pact aimed at having all 8 years old children reading and writing in the year 2022, can

certainly lead to an indirect pressure on the pedagogy adopted in preschool: it is known that in most private schools, many children are literate even before they get to first grade, while in many public schools the preschool curriculum does not value this element.

The resistance of many educators to invest in literacy activities and teaching to read and write in preschool could be partly attributed to the traditional fear encrusted in Brazilian school of assessments which lead to grade repetition and school exclusion. Current legislation prevents letting children fall behind during the transition from preschool to the first grade, but statistics still show numbers of children aged above 6, who are still in preschool (CAMPOS; ESPOSITO; GIMENES, 2013).

These are several aspects implicit behind these tensions. The choices on syllabus models, professional profile, types of regulation of education systems, all these belong to a scenario in which quality criteria and assessments fit.

In brief, upon observing the present politics and Early Childhood Education circumstances in the country, the following challenges and dilemmas could be identified:

- increasing social pressure for expansion of services versus the guarantee of a minimum level of quality;
- pressing needs of the subsequent education phases versus the high cost of quality day care centers and preschool and full-time attendance;
- respect of diversity and consideration of local context versus the need to ensure greater equality among social classes, regions, and ethnic and racial groups;
- preparatory pedagogical model for the school, prevalent in preschool versus the assistance model historically associated with nursery school, and both models, in turn, opposing to a child-centered pedagogy;
- different notions on school autonomy and the legitimacy of external regulatory systems.

## WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE PATHS?

Diverse and complex issues need to be taken into account in this debate. A comprehensive review of the research on the impact of quality of Early Childhood Education on young children development, conducted by Paul Leseman (2009), brings important conclusions to support this reflection.

The researches analyzed by the author not only investigate the impact of Early Childhood Education attendance over the

future education of children, but also bring details about which characteristics of the programs explain the different results observed in the longitudinal follow-up of students in their school life and beyond. So, several service models and several curricular and pedagogical guidelines adopted at the stage of Early Childhood Education are faced, researching their respective effects on the children's performance in various aspects: cognitive, emotional, and social. Some of these conclusions are highlighted below.

- The Early Childhood Education care model offered in centers associated with activities that aim to support and guide parents is the most effective.

This model is compared to education programs of young children in Early Childhood Education centers, such as crèches and preschools, which do not include working with families and with programs based exclusively on home visits and parent education. The examples of programs considered successful that fit this model “link intensive, early, and child-centered education held in centers to educational activities planned to be performed at home and to family support measures” (LESEMAN, 2009, p. 23).

Leseman also examines the results of large-scale programs and of public preschool networks. The researches that attempt to evaluate the impacts of these programs are somehow scarce, according to the author; among them is the research program developed in the United Kingdom, *the Effective provision of preschool education project* – EPPE – whose results indicate that the positive effects attributed to the frequency of several Early Childhood Education modalities for children aged 4-6, can be seen throughout the primary school.

- Home schooling programs are less effective than programs developed in Early Childhood Education centers.

The author cites several studies, including meta-analyzes, on results obtained in various countries, which show that...

...parents education programs, family support programs or those systems that combine several services dedicated to families or parents, which only focus on the child indirectly, do not produce significant effects on cognitive development and child language. (LESEMAN, 2009, p. 27)

- All children benefit from Early Childhood Education, but those from low-income families benefit even more.

Several studies examined by the author recorded significant gains for children emerging from disadvantaged groups, who have access to Early Childhood Education programs. The researches indicate a decrease of the difference among students with diverse social and cultural backgrounds, after attending preschool programs developed in several countries (LESEMAN, 2009, p. 24-25).

- Positive results are clearer and more consistent for children aged from 2-3 to 5 than in the previous range.

Considering the effects of nursery school for children aged under 3, the researches come to contradictory results: many studies conclude that the earlier and more intensive the program is, the better the results will be in the short term. Others record negative effects of some programs on the behavior of children in the longer term. Overall, the quality of nursery school seems to be a crucial factor to determine the direction of impacts detected by the studies examined by Leseman ( 2009, p. 26-27).

- Researches suggest that child-centered curriculum approach is more suitable for children aged 5, and more structured curriculum is most suitable for children aged above 5.

In his review, Leseman dedicates a considerable space in order to discuss studies which highlights the curricular and pedagogical choices adopted by the programs that were subject to impact assessments. After a brief history of the main proposed approaches to educational work with young children and the theories on child development, which they are based upon, the author suggests that the results vary according to considerations in short or long-term. This analysis seems quite interesting, because it puts into perspective the debate that opposes, the more focused proposals on didactic and direct instruction, and, those which give greater weight to the autonomy and initiative of the child – such as the DAP concept –, on the other hand.

One of the studies cited concludes that children coming out from preschool that adopted a more child-centered pedagogy showed better mastery of basic skills than those who had followed more “academic” programs. A later survey revealed better performance in the first three years of primary school on those who finished more academic programs, however, from this level

onwards, the ones who had participated in the so called “adequate to development” programs obtained better results. Other studies found similar results, differentiating the effects on academic achievement of positive results in other areas, such as better self-regulation, better social and behavioral adjustment, for instance. In these areas, the results of more child-centered programs revealed themselves as more positive.

Also considering those studies that controlled child’s age and the kind of curricular approach, Leseman gets into the synthesis previously appointed: between ages 3 and 4, the child-centered pedagogy should be privileged and at 5 and 6 years old, the program should adopt a more academic approach. It is important to notice that some studies indicate that the models considered *laissez faire* are the ones with the worst results (p. 32).

In the *Starting strong II* report (OECD, 2006), other important considerations complement these ones, because they stand on a comparative approach, which considers the Early Childhood Education supply structure and the notion of social policy prevailing in each country.

- The adoption of programs focused on cognitive development and preparation for primary school is more widespread in those developed countries with more heterogeneous populations and greater social inequality (France, the United Kingdom, and the United States).
- Basic skills in language and general knowledge “can be taken for granted in more homogeneous societies, but become, in multi-cultural societies, an issue of equal opportunities for children from low-income groups and immigrant backgrounds” (p. 136-137).
- “Learning standards also providenecessary benchmarks in an early childhood system, which in many instances is a patchwork of services and programmes...” (p. 137).
- Detailed guidelines are “unnecessary if the system employs a stable, well- educated workforce, capable of planning and evaluating children’s progress through the use of organized observation processes and a variety of informal assessment tools” (p. 144).
- The “holistic approach to early childhood development should not be interpreted to mean that standards are absent” (p. 139).

The perspective considered in this document, in regards to OECD countries, seems to suggest an interesting approach for the Brazilian debate, because it indicates that the curricular options

and the adoption of certain pedagogical models cannot be made without considering the context factors present in each situation. The characteristics of the population that needs to be looked after, the current institutional and legal standards, the typical professional to be recruited, and the existing financial resources are all components of a reality that surrounds and to some extent determines the range of options that really exists in each situation. This point of view does not support a type of debate based only on the opposition of different pedagogical traditions and suggests that if the real conditions to implement the desired practices are not placed in a particular context, there is a serious risk for them to remain just as goals or project bypassing the everyday experiences lived by most children in Early Childhood Education institutions.

If, on the one hand, quality is a relative concept that must emerge from a democratic debate and must constantly be reviewed, on the other hand, children are entitled to a service that meets their needs and their agency, the aspects mentioned should be part of this debate. If, in a democracy, the most general objectives of education cannot be different for socially unequal children, it is possible that the means to achieve them may be diverse. Deepening this discussion might help to move the debate toward educational experiences that contribute to a more just society.

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