

# Fabulating the centrality of care in the early childhood education\*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article problematizes the place of care in early childhood education. From a critical and conceptual analysis of care practices based on the commonplace of the inseparability of caring and educating in early childhood education, we will support the centrality of care in the daily life of nurseries and pre-schools, so that it is possible to articulate its three dimensions, namely caring for oneself, caring for others and being cared for. We will show how care can be considered not only as a practice inextricably linked to educating, but also as a fundamental attitude of a pedagogy of childhood that recognizes the centrality of care and intentionally seeks to articulate its three dimensions. To this end, we will approach care from a broader conception, which involves and transcends the care practices that are directly linked to the bodies of babies and young children in center for early childhood settings.

## Keywords

Care – Body – Early childhood education – Pedagogy.

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\* English version by Rennini Taquini. The authors take full responsibility for the translation of the text, including titles of books/articles and the quotations originally published in Portuguese.

**1-** Research data: Data availability: the entire dataset supporting the findings of this study has been published within the article itself.

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<https://doi.org/10.1590/S1678-4634202551286779en>

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## Introduction

The debate concerning the specificity of early childhood education and the identity of the nursery and preschool teacher has brought to light the understanding that caring and educating are inseparable in the first stage of basic education. Since the Federal Constitution of 1988 recognized the child's right to early childhood education, this debate began to problematize the school model, questioning its pretentious position as a legitimate substitute for the social hygiene movement and its corresponding pedagogy, the pedagogy of submission, that was practiced in welfare institutions for poor children since the end of the nineteenth century (Cerisara, 1999; Campos, 2008; Kuhlmann Jr., 2010).

From this debate, the inseparability of caring and educating became not only a cause among intellectuals and social movements but also a commonplace in the experience of thought, which made it possible to bring together different social actors in the effort to guarantee the constitutional right to early childhood education (Azevedo, 2007; Batista, 2023; Campos, 1994; Campos, 2008; Cerisara, 1999; Coutinho, 2007; Kuhlmann Jr., 2000; Macedo, 2006). The inseparable character between care practices and educational practices in early childhood education, split by the school model that conceives education as a set of teaching and learning activities, reveals the impossibility of drawing a line that clearly defines the limits of one practice in relation to the other (Campos, 2008). "Everything happens in an integrated way," affirms Maria Malta Campos (2008), so that caring and educating occur simultaneously in diaper changes, park visits, moments of handwashing before meals, circle time, painting activities, and play.

Thus, one may say that the commonplace of the inseparability between caring and educating emerge as a by-product of the debate about the specificity of early childhood education and the identity of the nursery and preschool teacher (Batista, 2023). From this also arises the political confrontation between two conceptions of early childhood education that, according to Moysés Kuhlmann Jr. (2000), appeared to be opposed to one another. The educational concept described its adversary, the welfare-oriented conception, as a non-pedagogical approach, discursively placed in the negative pole of a false polarity.

Kuhlmann Jr.'s analyses (2000, 2010) show that welfare-oriented institutions, whose purpose was to serve orphans and poor children, also had an educational proposal insofar as they organized their practices around social conditioning and obedience. Thus, as Kuhlmann Jr. (2010) points out, it would be a mistake to maintain the historical interpretation that the educational conception was the antithesis of the welfare-oriented conception, as if the former had inaugurated a pedagogical approach to the care and education of babies and young children. The description of the welfare-oriented conception as a non-pedagogical approach left out of scope the hygienist and authoritarian practices, as well as the philanthropic and clientelist discourses (Kuhlmann Jr., 2010).

Even though the historical interpretation erroneously opposed an welfare-oriented conception to an educational one, this false polarity produced mobilizing effects. As this political confrontation between conceptions of early childhood education was directly linked to the debate about the identity and training of professionals who worked directly with babies and children, it became possible to transform an experience of disrespect and humiliation into a struggle for children's rights and for the recognition of teaching in



early childhood education (Kuhlmann Jr., 2010; Honneth, 2009). For Maria Malta Campos (1994), it was necessary to have an integrated view of caring and educating in order to overcome the dichotomy between what used to be called the welfare-oriented conception and the educational conception.

The inseparability of caring and educating made it possible to think of early childhood education within a grammar of social struggles for rights that required – and still requires today – acts of political resistance. Despite the advances of these struggles, there remains a residue of that pedagogy of submission (Kuhlmann Jr. 2000, 2010) that persists in our political horizon. The struggle for the recognition of teaching in early childhood education, for instance, continues today in several Brazilian municipalities, led by the movement *Somos Todas Professoras* (“We Are All Teachers”) (Mandl, 2024).

Since the 1990s, the inseparability of caring and educating has become a political instrument against what remained of the pedagogy of submission, which not only subjects babies and children to practices of domination but also subordinates female education workers. It is a device of submission that gives new contours to the historical and rights-bearing individual, fitting neatly within the neoliberal ideology (Kuhlmann Jr., 2010; Mandl, 2024). Thus, even today, it is possible to extract surplus value from the labor of women who work directly with babies and children without recognizing them as teachers.

By being used as an important political instrument against the effects of this device of submission, the inseparability of caring and educating became both a cause for social movements defending children’s right to education and, at the same time, a cliché of pedagogical discourse (Batista, 2023). We are sufficiently familiar with this cliché to the point that we no longer question the scope and political meaning of this inseparability. In this article, we propose to reflect on the centrality of care in early childhood education and, from there, to sustain caring as an ethical and political foundation for a pedagogy of childhood that recognizes care in its three dimensions: caring for the self, caring for the other, and being cared for.

## Methodology

In this article, we seek to carry out a critical and conceptual analysis of care practices based on the commonplace of the inseparability of caring and educating in early childhood education. Contrary to the cliché, which refers us to a mechanical repetition of an argument, the commonplace points to an inventive reservoir that enables the enunciation of new arguments (Hansen, 2019).

According to João Adolfo Hansen (2019), the commonplace is a generic argument to be specified by a particularizing question. To think of the inseparability of caring and educating as a commonplace makes it possible to create a configuration between these two activities. With this, we intend to break the vicious circle that closes upon the following two statements: caring is educating, and educating is caring. Although this tautology can be strategically used in the political confrontation of social movements, in pedagogical practice and in the exercise of thought, the circularity of this argument produces a paralyzing effect (Bryner, 2014).



The diagnostic work of educational research, conducted by Bernadete Gatti (2012), identified conceptual fragility as one of the main challenges to be overcome by researchers who not only insert themselves into this field but also construct it within the historical movement of the intentions that drive studies and investigations. Nearly a decade later, Cláudio Bosco and Eldon Mühl (2021), acknowledging the validity of Gatti's diagnosis, affirm that by neglecting the contributions of the philosophy of education to the field of educational research, the challenge identified by Gatti remains unresolved if researchers do not anchor themselves in a critical dialogue with traditions of thought and research.

Gatti (1999) highlights the fact that, in human sciences research, it is common to transpose theories and approaches from more consolidated traditions into areas where this transposition has not yet occurred. Conceptual fragility arises from this transposition without a critical dialogue with those traditions. When the scope and adequacy of concepts in relation to the problems and methods of addressing them are lost, concepts become fragile, and theories are distorted or turned into dogmas (Gatti, 1999). What distinguishes the knowledge produced by educational research from that of other traditions of thought and inquiry, according to Gatti (1999), is that it aims at intervention, an intentional action of a professional nature. "Reflection, study, and investigation on one's modes of intervention constitute its privileged field of knowledge construction" (Gatti, 1999, p. 66).

In this sense, Bosco and Mühl (2021) warn of the risk of forgetting the question concerning the validity of educational knowledge. When educational research ceases to systematically reflect on the forms of rationality underlying it, the knowledge it produces loses validity to the extent that it neglects the exercise of critique and consistency in the construction of educational knowledge and the educational field (Gatti, 2012; Bosco & Mühl, 2021). On the other hand, the understanding of this intentional action depends on another kind of knowledge - one that arises from the incorporation of theories into practices with socially defined aims (Gatti, 1999). Hence the need for a critical dialogue with traditions of thought and research to overcome conceptual fragility in the field of educational studies (Gatti, 2012; Bosco & Mühl, 2021).

Through critical dialogue with the traditions of philosophy of education and early childhood education, we aim to problematize care practices in the teaching of babies and young children. The task is to construct an issue of these modes of intervention, an intentional action of a professional nature capable of confronting the conceptual fragility of educational research while sustaining the exercise of critique and consistency in the construction of educational knowledge.

According to Michel Fabre (2011, p. 27):

What is called a problematic is precisely that structure which defines the conditions of possibility of thought or of the subjects' action and which grants the status of problem to this or that set of elements or accidents with which subjects will be confronted.



## **From where do we speak about care practices in early childhood education?**

But from where do we speak when we propose to construct a problematic about care practices in early childhood education? We shall begin by defining our *lugar de fala* (henceforth, this term will be used as “standpoint”). This concept is founded not on an ontological notion that seeks to define the essence of the speaker but on a discursive notion that delimits from where one speaks (Ribeiro, 2017). The standpoint is not the physical space we occupy in order to voice our ideas. Nor does it imply a restriction on the circulation of discourse, or any form of authorization determining who can or cannot speak on a given subject.

According to Djamila Ribeiro (2017), the concept of standpoint indicates the point of view and social locus of discourse and of the one who enunciates it. And it allows dissonant voices to produce fissures within hegemonic discourse (Ribeiro, 2017). In this way, the standpoint opens a space for thought to consider what has remained unthought due to a series of interdictions imposed upon discourse. The standpoint articulates identities and forms of belonging.

In other words, when we speak, our speech is produced through an assemblage that may reveal or conceal the social markers that have subjectively shaped us. In our speech, we may express inequalities of gender, class, race, age, or geographic region. However, through a series of interdictions produced by hegemonic discourse, our speech may simply conceal these inequalities.

The concept of standpoint can also reveal experiences inscribed in our bodies through migration, language, and the cultural differences that characterize each region of our country, as well as through political convictions etc. In summary, when we speak or write, our speech and writing are never neutral. For this reason, the concept of standpoint allows for the discursive articulation of those experiences that constitute our modes of subjectivation.

Contrary to the neutral and rational discourse postulated by the subject of modern science, the concept of standpoint releases such interdictions and enables the enunciation of a discourse that involves not only the subjective marks revealing parts of our life history but also the social demarcations that indicate our point of view and social position (Ribeiro, 2017).

We will speak about care practices in early childhood education from the standpoint of teaching, that is, from the position occupied by two teachers. A black, Northeastern, diasporic woman, activist, former educational administrator, and friend of a nonwhite, Southeastern man, philosopher, teacher and psychoanalysis student decide to think together about the centrality of care in early childhood education. It is from this social place, shaped by our educational paths and professional experiences, that we will speak about care in early childhood education. From this standpoint, traversed by both intellectual and affective care for thought and language, our experiences matter. Therefore, not only ideas but also affects underlie our standpoint. They are not merely subjective entities that alter our emotional state.



Affects can circulate and create bonds among us, teachers of early childhood education. Because of this, they make it possible to establish a community of professionals who work directly with babies and children, who affect and are affected by one another's speech and gestures. For this to be possible, one must know how to listen; to recognize difference as that which makes a difference; to learn to coexist with dissent; and to perceive conflict as a possibility for democratic coexistence.

By proposing to speak about care practices from the perspective of those who care for children and of those who dedicate themselves to preparing others to assume this position, we will sustain the centrality of care in early childhood education. In this sense, we will seek to address care in its three dimensions: caring for the self, caring for the other, and being cared for. Our starting point will be to consider care not only as an everyday practice within early childhood institutions but also as a fundamental attitude of caring teaching.

To conceive of care as a fundamental attitude in our teaching practice in early childhood education presupposes a broad conception of care, that is, one that encompasses and transcends the bodily care of babies and young children. In this sense, care is the element that supports everything we do and everything we endure when we take on the task of educating the youngest ones.

## **What does the fable of Care make us think about?**

In Roman mythology, it is said that Care was an inventive, zealous, and loving being. One day, Care knelt by the edge of a lake and, marveling at the fertile soil, shaped that clay. Enchanted by his creation, he wished to give it life. Care went to Jupiter and asked him to breathe the spirit of life into that creature. Overjoyed with the life that had just been created, he wanted to give the living being a name. But Earth, who had provided the raw material for its creation, claimed the right to name it, since the creature had been made from its substance. Care then called upon Saturn to mediate the dispute and help decide who should name the creature.

As mediator, Saturn proposed the following division: when this creature dies, its soul will return to Jupiter; when it no longer has life, its body will return to Earth; but since it was Care who first gave it form before life, Care should have the right to name it. And thus, Care gave the being the name Homo, that is, "the one who comes from *Humus*."

This mythological narrative, retold by Leonardo Boff (1999) in his book *Saber Cuidar: Ética do cuidado, compaixão pela terra (Knowing How to Care: The Ethics of Care, Compassion for the Earth)*, offers us a reflection on the importance of care for life and, consequently, for the education of babies and young children. In the fable, it is Care who gives form to the body and makes possible the beginning of human life. We are the result of care, even before our physical appearance in the world. Under the aegis of care, body, life, and existence are intimately interconnected. Thanks to care, we can not only sustain life but also confer a human character upon the living being. In other words, care is what makes it possible for the living being to become human. To care for someone, to dedicate care to a human being, is to refine that experiment in humanity that comes into the world



with each birth. What this mythological narrative teaches us is that we are beings of care, that we were made through care and that we depend on it to live.

## **The care of the self: Ignorance and Knowledge**

Caring of the self constitutes, from a logical standpoint, the first dimension of care, even though from an existential standpoint it follows the experience of being cared for. For this reason, we begin with this dimension in order to reflect on a pedagogy of childhood that recognizes the centrality of care. How could one care for others without knowing how to care of the self? Knowing how to care of the self is, above all, a matter of being occupied with the self. The care of the self consists in subjective knowledge that the subject can attain only insofar as they concern themselves with their own being. Only the subject of this knowledge can speak about themselves. This self-knowledge can never aspire to universal status. It is a particular and specific knowledge of the subject about the self, a knowledge of what constitutes us subjectively as unique and singular beings. To be occupied with the self allows for the formulation of a kind of knowledge that no one else can possess. No doctor, psychologist, priest, or pastor; no specialist or spiritual director, in short, no one can know more about us than we ourselves do. This fundamental dimension of the care of the self is, first and foremost, a relation to knowledge and to the subject's own truth.

The care of the self is an ancient practice that was philosophically elaborated by Plato (Foucault, 2010). In the Platonic dialogue between Socrates and Alcibiades, the issue of self-care is posed as a precondition for the exercise of political power. The young Alcibiades presents himself to Socrates as someone who feels prepared to govern the city and, consequently, to govern his fellow citizens. With his habitual method of examining and refuting his interlocutors, Socrates questions him about what it means to govern the city. Alcibiades' answer leads him into a dead end: "By the gods, Socrates, I do not know what I am saying, and I fear I have spent much time being ignorant without realizing it" (Plato, 127d). It is at this moment that Socrates reveals to the young Alcibiades the importance of ἐπιμεληθῆναι σαυτοῦ, to care of the self, to be occupied with the self (Plato, 127d).

Upon recognizing his own ignorance, young Alcibiades can begin to occupy himself with himself, and, seizing the opportune moment that his youth affords him, he can discover, within his condition of ignorance, a set of techniques related to the care of the self.

In one of his final lecture courses, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Michel Foucault (2010) dwells at length on this Platonic dialogue, Alcibiade, showing how the care of the self inaugurated a long tradition of reflective and voluntary practices through which the ancients sought a transformation of themselves. Thus, caring for the self enables the subject of care to invent new modes of subjectivation; new ways of being, speaking, and acting that configure a *technology of the self* (Foucault, 2010).

Reconstructing this scene from the dialogue in which Socrates and Alcibiades arrive at the notion of care of the self, Foucault (2010) makes four observations regarding the emergence of this knowledge in philosophical discourse. The first one is that the need of caring for the self is linked to the exercise of power (Foucault, 2010). One must be



occupied with the self in order to occupy the self with the affairs of the city, that is, with politics. To govern the city well, one must first govern the self well.

The second observation concerns the insufficiency of Alcibiades' education. As an aspirant to political power, Alcibiades did not even know that he did not know how to care for himself, that is, he was ignorant of his own ignorance. The need to care for the self is inscribed not only in his ambition to govern the city, as part of his political project, but also within his pedagogical deficit (Foucault, 2010).

The third observation made by Foucault (2010) is that Alcibiades finds himself at a critical moment in his existence. He is neither too young nor too old to occupy himself with himself. Alcibiades stands between the end of education and the beginning of politics. He is no longer a child to be barred from public life, nor has he yet reached an age too advanced to concern himself with such matters.

And the fourth and final observation concerns the young man's perplexity upon discovering not only that he was ignorant without realizing it but also that he does not even know precisely what he is ignorant of. This effect of disorientation is precisely what enables young Alcibiades to glimpse new paths toward realizing his political project.

If, as we have seen above, the care of the self is a fundamental dimension of a pedagogy of childhood that recognizes the centrality of care, why can we not reconfigure our practices without first modifying our ways of being, speaking, and acting? In the daily life of nurseries and preschools, the need for self-care is equally linked to the exercise of power. Just as Alcibiades, upon realizing his own ignorance, wishes to occupy himself with himself in order to carry out his political project in relation to his fellow citizens, so we, early childhood teachers, upon recognizing our own ignorance, may intentionally seek to know something of ourselves in order to realize our educational project in relation to babies and young children.

For this reason, being occupied with the self makes it possible to transform the modes of relation we establish with the subjects of education from the earliest stages of life and it allows us to reconfigure the adult-centered - and authoritarian! relation - between those who must command because they are adults and know everything, and those who must obey because they are children and know nothing.

In authoritarian fiction, the temporal difference between two people is enough to authorize any attitude of disrespect or even oppression. The care of the self implies recognizing that there are forms of knowledge and experience that we, adults, have ignored without realizing it. Not only those knowledge and experience that come from children, but also in the modes of relation we establish with them. It is as if, throughout our lives, we had left behind a series of objects of desire that could have constituted us subjectively in other ways. There are traces of these in our bodies, but to find what remains of them in us, we must know what we lack and perceive that within us lies a potential for knowing. Even without knowing exactly what we lack or understanding our desire clearly, we can, from our condition of ignorance and through our interaction with children, invent other modes of subjectivation.

The care of the self is inscribed within the pedagogical deficit of our teacher education and points to the gaps in our training that remain unfilled throughout our teaching careers. This deficit is not merely a curricular issue, though curriculum is indeed



important for teacher education and practice. It arises from what we discover, through our interactions with children, that we do not know; from what our bodies are incapable of doing. If we do not know how to sing, dance, draw, paint, play, tell stories, and so many other things we might do with our bodies, our practices will likely fail to grasp what is most elemental in children's lives: creation and invention.

Most likely, if we recognized our pedagogical deficit and sought to be occupied with ourselves, we would already have overcome, in early childhood education, those pedagogical practices that, based on the school model, control and monitor children's bodies; those practices that insist on anticipating the content of the next stage of Basic Education.

For Fayga Ostrower (2004), the manifestation of creativity in children can be observed through their various modes of expression. "To create is to live, for the child" (Ostrower, 2004, p. 127). Hence, in the art of role-playing in which children are masters, everything can be invented by them or, more precisely, everything can be created within the own limits that they themselves establish for their creations. What are the limits of our practices with children? How can we expand these limits in order to overcome our own limits?

The care of the self appears at a critical moment in our lives, when one is neither too young nor too old to be concerned with it. In early childhood education, this critical moment arises not before but after entering the teaching profession, after experiencing the concrete realities of each nursery or preschool where we work directly with babies and young children. Socratic advice to seize the opportune moment applies, in our case, throughout our entire teaching career, from the beginning to the end of our professional life.

Caring of the self thus involves the perplexity of not knowing exactly what one does not know. The disorientation effect that affects the subject of self-care opens the possibility of experimentation to travel new paths of our human education. Not knowing the destination, but knowing that we are on the way, may mark the beginning of new possibilities to experience other modes of being, speaking, and acting.

This effect, which can inaugurate a new mode of subjectivation, is not without anguish. To be disoriented is to lose the certainties that once guided us; to walk for a time without the reassurance of the signposts that point the correct path to our destination. What should we do when the school model ceases to guide our pedagogical practices with children? Even though early childhood education policies, since 2009 with the publication of the *National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education*, have banned the school model from the pedagogical horizon of early childhood teaching, it is only when we occupy ourselves with ourselves that we recognize our pedagogical deficits and position ourselves in the critical moment of our lives in search of new paths that we can invent, like children and artists, a pedagogy of childhood that acknowledges the centrality of care.

### **Care for the other:** attention and disposition

Caring for the other requires being attentive and available. To recognize the other's needs, one must be attentive. And to respond to those needs, one must be disposed to act. In many cases, demands are not explicitly articulated by the subject of care. Even among those who already inhabit language and can speak, the demand is often not addressed



discursively to the other. In early childhood education, one may demand the other's care through differences in one's state with the self or in relation to the collective of children (Galvão, 2004).

For this reason, it is necessary to remain attentive in order to perceive variations in mood and shifts in the emotional states that manifest in relationships with others and with the self. Care for the other entails an openness to welcome the "expressive exuberance" of children, in the words of Izabel Galvão (2004), that is, a willingness to coexist with the many situations of enthusiasm, conflict, transgression, and subversion of the adult-centered order.

Care for the other both involves and transcends practices of feeding and hygiene. While these are fundamental for the health and well-being of educational subjects, it is essential to recognize the importance of the body in care practices.

As a repository of social signs, the body is marked by culture from birth (Daolio, 1994). The educational process can be thought of as a process of incorporation, according to Jocimar Daolio (1994), a process through which educational subjects learn culture through their bodies, being, at the same time, products and producers of culture.

We can therefore affirm that the way we carry out care practices with and through our bodies has been transmitted to us culturally. And, within an early childhood education center, there exists a plurality of cultures inscribed in the bodies of those who care and that continue to be inscribed in the bodies of those who are cared for. Each teacher has learned through her own body and experience how to care for the body of another one.

Within this plurality of cultures, there are ways of caring that are more nurturing than others. Each institution, through its practices and pedagogical proposals, defines which modes are considered appropriate and which are not. For example, there are ways of changing babies' diapers that are not only more welcoming than others but also foster autonomy, by allowing the subject of care the freedom of movement and engagement with practices related to their development (Tardos; Szantos, 2021). For newborns to develop autonomy, according to the educators of the Lóczy Institute, Anna Tardos and Agnès Szantos, they must experience a full sense of security. They identify the caregiver's availability and attentiveness as fundamental elements of this feeling.

It is essential for babies to experience immediate assistance when expressing a need (Tardos; Szantos, 2021). The caregiver's gaze observes and decides the exact moment to offer help, but for this to occur, the baby must be seen as an active and competent being from the moment of birth; a being rich in spontaneous initiatives and interests toward the surrounding world (Tardos; Szantos, 2021). Conversely, as Fabienne Brugère (2023, p. 82-83) argues, "this attentive availability of caregivers is constructed through respect for the specificity of care work, which involves a particular relationship with time, structured by the uncertainties of human life".

In this second dimension of care, there also exists a margin of ignorance. Through practice and experience, it is impossible to achieve a level of mastery that would exempt us from questioning our own care practices. How often do we, nursery and preschool teachers, ask ourselves whether our children are content with the way they are being cared for? To be content means to be satisfied with how one's body has been cared for and to feel safe knowing that one's needs are attentively met by someone willing to care.

This should be a fundamental question for anyone who has chosen teaching in this field, understood here as the work carried out directly with babies and young children in an early childhood education institution, and one that we should ask ourselves daily and collectively in the institutions where we work. It is also a question that we, as teacher educators, should encourage in our courses and in the early childhood centers we access, via universities, through internships, and research.

It is evident that this question cannot be answered objectively through an opinion survey, even though, in such a case, we could certainly obtain meaningful responses if we knew how to pose meaningful questions. To formulate a good answer, however, requires availability and

We could, moreover, unfold this question into many others. This would help us, as we have seen, to develop a more comprehensive response and to reflect on how care practices are carried out in a particular early childhood education institution. Do the care practices developed in our nurseries and preschools respect children's rights? Do these institutions recognize the subjective right to the time and rhythm of babies' and children's bodies? Do they respect the diversity of cultures and identities that constitute their life stories? Do they acknowledge the beliefs and values transmitted by families, recognizing the differences and conflicts that arise from this plurality? It is precisely to the extent that such questions are asked by professionals working in early childhood institutions that singular responses can be formulated. Thus, the elaboration of such responses itself depends on a relation of care both with the self and with others.

Nurseries and preschools are not islands separated by tranquil waters from a turbulent social continent. If we look beyond early childhood institutions, how are care practices valued in our society? Which of these practices are recognized as work? We could catalog numerous care activities, both inside and outside early childhood institutions: feeding, protecting, cleaning, transporting, providing, comforting, welcoming etc. In all of them, we would find a vulnerable subject demanding someone's care.

We know that each society develops these practices in distinct ways and that, over historical time, they may change within the same society. Currently, according to Fabienne Brugère (2023), we live under the logic of the neoliberal management of care, a logic that disregards everything that pertains to the body. The neoliberal individual is active, autonomous, and entrepreneurial. Their success, like their failure, does not depend on others; they are, above all, a direct product of their own capacities and initiatives.

In the figure of the neoliberal individual, care disappears without a trace. There is no room for vulnerability, for in neoliberal logic, to be vulnerable is a shortcoming. As care practices are not structured as relations of exchange, they hold no value for the neoliberal individual. Yet care fundamentally concerns our human condition, our shared world, and the possibilities of giving, attending, and being available.

In opposition to the neoliberal management of care, Brugère (2023) proposes an ethics of care aimed at producing a systematic reflection on caring; a politics that recognizes the specificities of care work and a critical theory that establishes care as a central category for social analysis.



If we were to look historically at care practices across different societies, we would see that they are intimately related to the domestic sphere and ideologically assigned to women (Brugère, 2023; Iaconelli, 2023). From a historical standpoint, the institutionalization of care practices for babies and young children outside the home is relatively recent, making it possible for such care to be provided by people who are not family members.

Only in the mid-nineteenth century, according to Kuhlmann Jr. (2011), did these practices become institutionalized, first in asylums, then in maternal schools and kindergartens. They should not be naturalized simply because they are predominantly performed by women. This fact is not at all natural, despite what patriarchal morality made us believe.

The naturalization of the mother as the only or most capable person to care for her baby is a rhetorical device of maternalist discourse. According to Vera Iaconelli (2023), by inscribing care within the same experiential order as gestation, childbirth, and breastfeeding, the mother becomes the main person responsible for caring for her baby. “The experience of gestating, giving birth, and breastfeeding should not be confused with any guarantee or with a certain quality of care” (Iaconelli, 2023, p. 26).

The naturalization that underlies these practices ignores the power relations that reinforce stereotyped differences between the sexes (Brugère, 2023). As a result, such practices are socially devalued, and to the extent that they are historically and ideologically characterized as domestic activities, they are not recognized as labor that, like any other form of work, requires qualification and dignified conditions for its performance.

## **O ser cuidado: corpo e vulnerabilidade**

If care practices are ways of recognizing and responding to the needs of others, they also require attention to the well-being of the one who cares. Were we to exclude this dimension, the one of being cared for, we could objectively think of a more efficient way to carry out care practices in early childhood education institutions.

From this exclusion, we could think about care practices in terms of efficient techniques. There are certain ways of doing things that are more efficient than others, and therefore some are better than others. By framing care in terms of efficiency, we could apply an economic rationale to care practices, with the goal of improving the dynamics and functioning of the institutions.

In this sense, care practices are configured as mere tasks aimed at ensuring the maintenance of life. By excluding the dimension of being cared for, the ends justify the application of a series of procedures to increase the efficiency of the means, and the means or human resources, when they can no longer perform their function—must be replaced by others, since what matters is the functioning of the institution

As can be seen, the dimension of being cared for is fundamental to avoid the risk of thinking about institutional practices and pedagogical actions from a technical and instrumental rationality of educating.

Thinking about a pedagogy that recognizes the centrality of care in early childhood education implies the inclusion of this dimension. Thus, it becomes evident that those who care also need to be cared for

When the third dimension of care is incorporated, we notice that it is not about applying technical knowledge to bodily practices to achieve greater output with minimal effort. This is the rationality of the production line that, unfortunately, still underpins one of the possible models for the daily organization of care practices in certain early childhood institutions

Based on this model, for example, diaper changes in a day nursery can be organized according to a production-line logic (one adult removes the baby from their context and places them on the baby changing station; waiting for it, another one prepares and cleans the baby's body, while a third one puts on and adjusts a clean diaper, leaving the baby ready to return to their context).

We could provide further examples in which the production-line logic acts in the daily organization of day nurseries and preschools, ranging from meal routines to the implementation of stereotyped activities, but, our purpose here is merely to indicate that something fundamental is lost when we attempt to apply the same parameters to evaluate and manage care processes for young children.

It happens that the notion of bodily technique, as conceived by Marcel Mauss (2003), is not limited to the effectiveness of movements or the efficiency of results. This notion points to the body as the main and most natural technical object of the human being; that is, the fact that we socially learn to use our bodies to perform all kinds of actions."

Bodily techniques are ways of using the body. According to Mauss (2003), they are subject to a systematic knowledge of gestures that is transmitted from generation to generation, such that there is as much tradition and authority in bodily practices as there is in language transmission. From this perspective of bodily technique, it becomes clear that care practices are also subject to a knowledge of gestures passed down through generations; that is, they are intimately connected to a practical know-how transmitted within and through the body.

In order to care for beings who demand our attention and responsiveness in conditions of vulnerability, we require a know-how grounded in direct experience with care. If this transmission occurs in the same way as we are socialized into language, that is, with a speaking being that directs words to a being who still does not speak, then we enter into care practices without knowing how to care and, through our bodies, from the moment we are born, we gradually become familiar with this know-how as it is conveyed by those who have assumed responsibility for our care.

Little by little, as we achieve a certain degree of autonomy and become less dependent on adults, we gradually forget this condition, which is inevitably experienced by us at some point in our lives. We are vulnerable beings, and sooner or later, we will once again depend on the care of others.

In other words, just as a crying baby demands our attention and availability to be comforted, we, as adults, will also require the attention and availability of others in order to be cared for. The critical question is how we respond to this cry that requires the care



of another. To what extent are we capable of attending to our own cry when we need to be supported by someone else?

We would like to return to the example presented above regarding care practices carried out in early childhood education institutions in a serial and automatic manner. The organization of daily routines in day nurseries and preschools, structured according to a production-line logic, is not merely a model that can violate children's rights or deprive them of the meaning of care; it is also a model that can generate suffering, and even physical and mental health problems, for those who provide care.

Caroline Fanizzi (2023) shows how adopting an abstract model to guide and validate educational processes produces effects of objectification rather than processes of subjectivation. Within a production-line logic, those who care are expected to perform their tasks in the shortest possible time and with the least expenditure of energy. It is only by sacrificing physical and psychological exhaustion of the ones who care that this model can work.

Spinoza's Ethics (2008) teaches us that our body exists as we feel it. Thus, a body that follows the logic of the effectiveness of movements and the efficiency of results is a body that, because it tends toward exhaustion, feels exhausted. Within this logic, a body affected by the effects of objectification will affect other bodies with the same speed and automatism that this model requires of its adherents to work. Sick leaves, service restriction letters, and functional readjustments can be seen as indicators of the collapse of bodies in an early childhood education institution that did not adequately consider the dimension of the being cared for.

The perception of the seriousness of this problem is obscured by the division of labor that commonly occurs in early childhood education institutions. By dividing teaching staff into assistants and lead teachers, or into those who execute and those who plan, the inseparability of caring and educating is likewise divided, even though it is discursively affirmed otherwise.

The collapse of a body that provides care exposes the working conditions of educational staff and reshapes the image of the teaching staff, altering the way we imagine the relationship between the bodies who provide care and those who are cared for. When this occurs, the collapsing body is often perceived as an obstacle rather than as a symptom of the teaching staff.

We could, or perhaps should, also include here the workers who handle food preparation and the cleaning of spaces in early childhood education institutions, all of whom are educators and, for the most part, black women, who, in many municipalities, are rendered invisible by the outsourcing of labor, suffering, in an even more brutal way, the effects of objectification. "Care is the object of a social division according to gender, race, and class" (Brugère, 2023, p. 81). In the face of a collapsing body, a body that has become ill in and through work, it is necessary to recognize vulnerability as a common trait between those who provide care and those who are cared for."



## Final considerations

Starting from the inseparability of caring and educating in early childhood education, we have structured a problematic that grants care practices the status of a problem while simultaneously defining the conditions for thinking about intentional actions aimed at building a pedagogy of childhood that recognizes the centrality of care. We have fabulated this centrality of care by distinguishing and articulating its three dimensions: caring of the self, caring for the other, and being cared for.

And caring for the self points to a relationship with the knowledge and truth of the subject, a knowledge that is unknown and presupposes the subject's assumption of ignorance. It is only from the position of the ignorant that the subject of care can know something about themselves, which, in relation to the other, allows for the creation and invention of new ways of being, saying, and acting.

Attention to the other one presupposes a careful responsiveness to the demands and needs of babies and young children. While caring pertains to our human condition, despite being historically and ideologically regarded as a feminine attribute, care practices must be understood as an ethical and political stance that ensures the possibility of life in our shared world.

In light of our condition as vulnerable beings, being cared for constitutes the common bond between the one who cares and the one who is being cared for. In this third and final dimension of care, the body assumes a central role, as it enables the subject of care to establish a relationship with their past and personal history through their own body. It is from that, rather than from a feminine essence or nature, that a know-how of care can emerge. Thinking of a pedagogy childhood that acknowledges the centrality of care therefore entails reflecting on intentional actions that integrate these three dimensions of care.

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*Received on: May 20, 2024*

*Approved on: October 21, 2024*

**Editor:** Prof. Dr. Mônica Caldas Ehrenberg

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