

Reflections of an access policy to early childhood education for malnourished babies and children

Os reflexos de uma política de acesso à educação infantil destinada a bebês e crianças desnutridas¹

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the *Creches e Centros de Atendimento à Infância Caxiense* (CCAIC) program, an intersectoral proposal for food and nutrition security, in the city of Duque de Caxias, Baixada Fluminense in the State of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which has children's malnutrition or nutritional risk as an enrollment criterion. First, we present a historical outline of this public policy to combat malnutrition. Next, we bring some research findings from the diagnostic evaluation of the public education network. Finally, we analyze the possible effects of this policy in guaranteeing the right to access kindergarten and discuss possible demands for an intersectoral policy for the care of babies and children. We explore the dilemmas and tensions of this policy aiming to mitigate poverty, such as the production of a prejudiced look at babies, children, and their families; the multidimensionality of eating, extrapolating a physical perspective of nutrients in the food discussion; the crystallization of enrollment criteria, naturalizing the commitment of constitutional precepts and the principle of equality that guarantee Early Childhood Education for all children. Thus, this work sought to question how the CCAIC policy has understood the social demands of babies, children, and families and its effects on their lives.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education. Malnutrition. Access. Intersectionality.

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RESUMO

Este artigo analisa como o programa Creches e Centros de Atendimento à Infância Caxiense (CCAIC), proposta intersetorial de segurança alimentar e nutricional, do município de Duque de Caxias, Baixada Fluminense do estado do Rio de Janeiro, que possui como critério de matrícula a desnutrição e/ou risco nutricional das crianças, tem traduzido as demandas sociais dos bebês, crianças e famílias, e seus possíveis efeitos na vida desses sujeitos. Para tanto, delineamos o histórico dessa política pública de combate à desnutrição; trazemos alguns achados advindos da análise diagnóstica da rede pública de educação infantil; e, por fim, analisamos os possíveis efeitos dessa política pública na garantia do direito ao acesso à creche, bem como vislumbramos demandas para uma política intersetorial de atendimento aos bebês e crianças. São explorados dilemas e tensões dessa política que tem como tarefa a mitigação da pobreza, como, por exemplo: a produção de um olhar preconceituoso sobre bebês, crianças e famílias, já que a ênfase está na noção de carência; a multidimensionalidade do ato de se alimentar, extrapolando uma perspectiva fiscalista dos nutrientes para a discussão da alimentação; a cristalização dos critérios de matrícula, naturalizando o comprometimento dos preceitos constitucionais e o princípio de igualdade que garantem a educação infantil para todas as crianças.

Palavras-chave: Educação Infantil. Desnutrição. Acesso. Intersectorialidade.

Introduction

This article is part of an ongoing broader research project, which analyzes evaluation concepts of the work with babies in childhood education. In this work, we analyze the *Creches e Centros de Atendimento à Infância Caxiense* (CCAIC - Kindergarten and Service Center for Caxias Childhood) that encompass seven institutions of the city of Duque de Caxias (state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), under the responsibility of the municipal secretaries of Education, Health, and Social Assistance. CCAIC is an intersectoral public policy of food and nutritional security that use children's low weight and short stature as criteria for enrollment. Even after legal advancements, such as those that established education as a right of all Brazilian children since birth and include childhood education as the first phase of K-12 (BRASIL, 1988; 1996), we can still find significant evidence of a medical-welfare approach, common in baby and children care in the early 20th century (KUHLMANN JUNIOR, 1991), and the discourses that emphasized childhood care as a mechanism against poverty (CAMPOS, 2011).

These meanings of childhood education, which still mark the work in kindergarten and preschools, play a part in producing evaluation practices. When analyzing the evaluation concepts that express themselves through the discourses and pedagogical practices with babies in the kindergarten context, we need to consider the senses produced by the professionals toward this action and their production conditions. As Castro and Souza (2017) pointed out, we need to problematize the programs targeting early childhood that combat poverty and/or improvement of school performance to

avoid understanding development, learning, and evaluation practices as fragments, contrary to Brazilian legal parameters. Even when no formal and concrete criteria are used to check children's experiences, they are subtly examined. Hence, we raise some questions: How does the medical-welfare logic impact the pedagogical work with babies? Are new inequalities being produced? In evaluating daily kindergarten routines, can teachers break away from the stigma of poverty and destitution, valuing babies in their specificity? Which discourses ground the evaluation practices in these contexts?

To analyze how the program CCAIC has been translating the demands of babies, children, and families and its effects on the subjects' lives, this article: i) presents the history of this public policy to combat malnourish; (ii) makes a diagnosis of the city of Duque de Caxias, pointing out its characteristics and the seven CCAIC that integrate the network; and iii) discusses possible effects of this public policy to guarantee the right to kindergarten, foreseeing demands for an intersectoral policy to attend babies and children.

The history of Creches e Centros de Atendimento à Infância Caxiense: a view over poor children

When resuming the historical trajectory of CCAIC, seeking the meanings delineated by this equipment, we started from a language concept that considers the statement and the enunciation context (BAKHTIN, 2003). According to Goulart (2013, p. 72), language, as the result of collective human activity, reflects society in all its economic and sociopolitical aspects. Politics is “[...] understood as the axiological form of organization and hierarchy of power in the collective sense of social life [...]”, produced “[...] in the word paths, establishing itself and establishing ways of acting, thinking, and building the large and tense societal dialogue”.

From this perspective, based on two works on the policy (CORTEZ, 2020; MARTINS *et al.*, 2022)² and documents produced in the scope of the Education Municipal Secretary, we seek to understand tendencies, conceptions, tensions, and gaps in the organization of childhood service in this public equipment, i.e., an attempt to understand what they say and do not say. Discourse is a social practice, an arena of ideological and political disputes, and is not a mirror of reality (BAKHTIN, 2006).

Within a context marked by poverty and social inequality, Duque de Caxias is in a peripheral region inhabited mainly by a low-income class, where the issue of malnourishment is perceived as a serious social problem. Since the 1980s, with the *Casas*

² We found only two studies on the theme— a master's dissertation and one article —both present the history of elaboration and implementation of the analyzed policy. The first work analyzes the effects of this policy to face social inequalities. The second reflects on the actions and discretionary decisions of school managers, nutritionists, and social assistants involved in weighting children.

de Acolhimento de Desnutridos São Gabriel (Ação Social Paulo VI – Arquidiocese de Duque de Caxias) and the Casa de Recuperação de Desnutridos (Sistema Municipal de Vigilância Alimentar e Nutricional), a set of assistentialist and compensatory actions targets poor population (CORTEZ, 2020), such as the program to attend the malnourished and pregnant women with nutritional risk, which distributed powdered milk and oil; issues induced by the program *Ação Cidadania* [Citizenship Action] (VASCONCELOS, 2004).

Among these actions, the protagonism of Dom Mauro Morelli, bishop of the Dioceses of Duque de Caxias and São João de Meriti in the Baixada Fluminense area, stands out. He promoted a vital movement against famine. From the information that 21% of children who attended the health unities were considered malnourished or at nutritional risk (CORTEZ, 2020), a public meeting was called, culminating with the mobilization of the project “*Mutirão contra a desnutrição materno-infantil e pelo direito à infância*” [Joint effort against mother-child malnutrition and for the right to childhood]. In 2001, approximately 23 thousand children up to 5 years old were weighed and “[...] more than 70% of these children were malnourished or in nutritional risk; their weights and/or statures were lower than the indexes established by the World Health Organization (WHO) as healthy” (MARTINS *et al.*, 2022, p. 3).

Later, in 2002, a project was created based on the action of the Diocese of Duque de Caxias, which attended to malnourished children. Thus, *Portal do Crescimento* [Growth Portal] was created. It was a recovery house for malnourished kids from 1 to 5 years old, which worked as a school unity. Its enrollment criteria were: a malnourishment diagnosis and a monthly *per capita* income of a maximum half minimum wage. According to Cortez (2020), income was not a criterion for accessing the policy. So, through the Municipal Law nº 1.686/2003 of Duque de Caxias, the first Portal was created in the neighborhood of Amapá, in the district of Xerém, one of the city’s poorest areas.

The proposal of *Portal do Crescimento* involved the Secretaries of Education, Social Action, Culture, and Housing, with the following theme axes: i) health, through food complementation; ii) income, through the support to families with programs of income generation; and iii) education, seeking children’s global development (CORTEZ, 2020). Within these axes, several activities were foreseen, such as the guarantee of four daily meals for children, the creation of a “little citizen” card by the Municipal Secretary of Health, family guidance to construct a meal, the development and implementation of parental courses, and the implementation of toy rooms, as playful and therapeutic activities.

Though foreseen, there were no teachers at the *Portal do Crescimento*. Pastoral volunteers were hired as agents (CORTEZ, 2020). Only in 2003 was a *Conselho Municipal de Notáveis* [Municipal Council of Notables] created to monitor and evaluate the program, articulating the sectors necessary for developing *Portal do Crescimento*.

A year later, the project grew with the creation of five new unities: Jardim Anhangá, Jardim Gramacho, Olavo Bilac, Parque Muísa, and Xerém.

History shows that the nutrition theme was a long-lasting theme for the public management of Duque de Caxias. We can see that through the Municipal Decree n° 4.890/2006, which established the program CCAIC, substituting the *Portais de Crescimento*. Until now, the enrollment criterion in these establishments is malnourishment and nutritional risk. Its last expansion occurred in 2006 with the inauguration of the seventh unity in Campos Elíseos.

According to Cortez (2020) and Martins *et al.* (2022), the project currently does not follow the foreseen operation because there was no doctor in the unities, nor the distribution of essential foods, but still offers four daily meals. “Even though the original design of the policy has changed, the CCAIC is consolidated as a pedagogical space amidst the challenge to recover the health of children, whose development was affected by malnourishment” (MARTINS *et al.*, 2022, p. 4). According to Cortez (2020), during interviews with CCAIC managers, there is a change in the nutritional profile in some contexts. Thus, there are some empty places.

Because of the lack of children with the profile expected for enrollment. This observation dialogues with Martins’s *et al.* (2022) work, which followed the weightings in 2020, and found that some units did not fill the available places. Even so, the works of Cortez (2020) and Martins *et al.* (2022) defend the maintenance of this equipment due to its presence in contexts of extreme poverty, low indexes of human development, and high levels of violence, easing families’ access to programs on social assistance, health, and hygiene guidance.

The project *Portal do Crescimento* has imprecisions as an institution of childhood education that go from its choice name to its pedagogical and sociopolitical role. Its general objective has the same emphasis as CCAIC, that is: “[...] to promote a program to combat malnourishment in the early childhood of Duque de Caxias considering the service to children between 1 to 5 years old in nutritional risk” (CORTEZ, 2020, p. 135). However, we find the term “educational activities focused on the theme healthy food” only in the specific objectives of CCAIC, while *Portal do Crescimento* intended to “[...] guarantee social, cognitive, and health interactions able to reintegrate in society the malnourished children between 0 to 6 years old, victims of different social ills and their respective families, improving their life quality and expectations [...]”. (CORTEZ, 2020, p. 124).

The texts are produced in political and social contexts that highlight notions about children and childhood(s). The meanings that emerge in the guiding documents of these policies allow us to ask some questions: To what extent can these conceptions be seen in the institutional contexts? How do the imprecisions, gaps, contradictions, and prejudices influence the relationships with the babies, the children, and families? Does a policy targeting poor children lead to relationships poor in affection and meaning?

The educational offer at the CCAIC

After two decades since the first kindergarten Portal do Crescimento, which originated CCAIC, much has changed. From 2000 to 2020, childhood education enrollment in the city increased from 9,897 to 24,449,³ two *Planos Nacionais de Educação* (PNEs - National Plans of Education) were approved (2001 and 2014), and childhood education was included in 2006 in the *Fundo de Manutenção e Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica e de Valorização dos Profissionais da Educação* (Fundeb- Maintenance and Development Fund for Basic Education and the Valuing of Education Professionals), and preschool became obligatory 2009. What other transformations occurred in the educational service in the public system of Duque de Caxias? What are the current educational offer conditions of the seven CCAIC? Seeking possible answers to these questions, we made a diagnostic analysis using quantitative data available at the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (IBGE - Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), in the 2010 Demographic Census, the base MUNIC of 2018, and the system *Cidades@*, complemented with the microdata of the *Censo Escolar da Educação Básica* [School Census of Basic Education] of the *Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira* (INEP- National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira). Therefore, the following analysis presents the demographic and administrative characteristics of the city and the data of CCAIC educational offer regarding the municipal public system.

Duque de Caxias is one of the most populous cities in Brazil, with 929,449 inhabitants in 2021. It is in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro. The population's schooling rate from 6 to 14 years old and the results reached in the *Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica* (IDEB - Development Index of Basic Education) can be considered low compared to the data from the state and the country. The municipal management has an exclusive secretary for education who handles the financial resources and considers the inclusion of students, teachers' early education, and the public call for enrollment as priorities. Since 2014, there has been an Education Municipal Plan with a structure of social control composed of a forum, education and food councils, and Fundeb. However, there are no records of an increase in the demand of the school-age population. In 2010, there were 70,301 children from 0 to 5 years old, representing 8.4% of the population. An increase in this population is expected due to the growth of live births between 2010 and 2015 registered in the Datasus (BRASIL, 2022).

The city is divided into 40 neighborhoods, seven of which have a CCAIC: Amapá, Campos Elíseos, Jardim Anhangá, Jardim Gramacho, Jardim Olavo Bilac, Parque Muisa,

³ We opted to consider the preschool enrollments added to the literacy class in 2000 and, in 2020, the sum of kindergarten and preschool. Available data at <https://www.gov.br/inep>. Accessed on August 15, 2022.

and Xerém. To recognize the peculiarities of each place, we worked with the statistical dispersion of each variable of the comparing to the cities' average. In other words, a neighborhood is different from another when a specific characteristic is at least two standard-deviations from the municipal average. Following this criterion, we can see, for instance, that in the CCAIC neighborhoods: i) Xerém and Amapá have a higher concentration of white and indigenous children, respectively; ii) Xerém has a higher concentration of men in the population; iii) in the neighborhood Jardim Anhangá, the household head is mainly in the age range between 30 and 39 years old, while in Campos Elíseos between 10 and 19 years old; iv) there is a greater concentration of households with five inhabitants in Jardim Anhangá and Amapá; and v) in Olavo Bilac there is a higher concentration of families with a *per capita* income between half and a minimum wage. Besides these differences, perceived through the variables race/color of 0 to 5 year-old children, sex, age of household head, number of inhabitants, and *per capita* income, we found no other distinction between the CCAIC neighborhoods, such as those who could be related to the type or incidence of literate people in the household.

Knowing who the children are, where they live, and the families' profiles are crucial to create public policies (FALCIANO, 2022). However, from the variables analyzed in the 2010 Census, we did not find any demographic characteristics that made the CCAIC stand out among the other neighborhoods in the city. Hence, what would be the determinant characteristics to choose and maintain these seven neighborhoods as priority areas to attend babies and children in the CCAIC?

Regarding the offer of childhood education, we can see a 48% increase in the number of enrollments in the public system of Duque de Caxias between 2009 and 2019, while there was practically no alteration in the 414 enrollments in CCAI in 2009 to 407 enrollments in 2019. We also noticed that the number of children from 0 to 3 years old in the public system grew in the schools where only kindergarten was offered, representing 42.6% of the total enrollments in 2019. The enrollments for children from 4 to 5 years old in schools with other phases of K-12 education, such as elementary schools, represented almost all the enrollments (90.9%) for this age range in the municipal public system in 2019.

If, on the one hand, the CCAIC did not follow the expansion of the system, on the other, they had significant importance in maintaining access to childhood education for babies. In Table 1, we present the enrollment data by age. We can see that the CCAIC attends more uniformly the enrollments in each age. It also represents 100%, 19.7%, 8.3%, and 7.2% of the children with less than 1 year old, 1, 2, and 3 years, though concentrating only 3.4% of the total enrollments in the public system.

TABLE 1 – NUMBER OF ENROLLMENTS AND PROPORTION BY AGE AND BY THE TOTAL OF THE MUNICIPAL SYSTEM AND CCAIC ACCORDING TO THE AGE RANGE BETWEEN 0 TO 5 YEARS OLD IN THE CITY OF DUQUE DE CAXIAS IN 2019

| Age | Total of municipal system | | CCAIC | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|--|
| | Number of enrollments | Proportion by age | Number of enrollments | Proportion by age | Proportion regarding the total of the system |
| Less than 1 | 1 | 0,0% | 1 | 0,2% | 100,0% |
| 1 year old | 315 | 2,6% | 62 | 15,2% | 19,7% |
| 2 years old | 1.154 | 9,7% | 96 | 23,6% | 8,3% |
| 3 years old | 1.355 | 11,4% | 97 | 23,8% | 7,2% |
| 4 years old | 3.911 | 32,9% | 92 | 22,6% | 2,4% |
| 5 years old | 5.167 | 43,4% | 59 | 14,5% | 1,1% |
| Total from 0 to 5 years old | 11.903 | 100,0% | 407 | 100,0% | 3,4% |

SOURCE: created by the authors based on *Censo Escolar do INEP- 2019* microdata.

When comparing the CCAIC with other public schools of the system offering kindergarten and preschool, we can see in Table 2 that they offer an infrastructure more adapted to the needs of children between 0 to 5 years old, and their spaces are adequate for feeding. Only one CCAIC did not have a pantry. In this table, we see that almost all children are attended full-time, which significantly differs from other schools in the system, mainly in preschool, where there is barely any full-time attendance in the public system.

TABLE 2 – INFRASTRUCTURE CHARACTERISTICS AND SCHOOLING TIME IN THE CCAIC CLASS COMPARED TO OTHER PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF THE SYSTEM, ACCORDING TO THE PHASES OF KINDERGARTEN AND PRESCHOOL IN THE CITY OF DUQUE DE CAXIAS IN 2019

| | CCAIC | | Other public schools | |
|--|--------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------|
| | Kindergarten | Preschool | Kindergarten | Preschool |
| Regarding the adaptation to childhood education | | | | |
| Has a children's bathroom | 85.7% | 85.7% | 100.0% | 51.8% |
| Has a children's playground | 85.7% | 85.7% | 65.4% | 38.8% |
| Has a bathroom with a shower | 85.7% | 85.7% | 80.8% | 64.7% |
| Has the three adaptations above | 71.4% | 71.4% | 53.8% | 18.7% |
| Regarding food resources | | | | |
| Has a kitchen | 100.0% | 100.0% | 96.2% | 99.3% |
| Has a pantry | 85.7% | 85.7% | 92.3% | 97.1% |
| Has a cafeteria | 100.0% | 100.0% | 88.5% | 85.6% |

(continue)

TABLE 2 – Conclusion

| | | | | |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Provides meals | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| <u>Regarding schooling time in class</u> | | | | |
| Up to 4 daily hours | 0.0% | 18.6% | 0.0% | 98.4% |
| Between 4 to 7 daily hours | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.8% | 1.2% |
| 7 or more hours a day | 100.0% | 81.4% | 99.2% | 0.4% |

SOURCE: created by the authors based on *Censo Escolar do INEP - 2019* microdata.

Based on the existence or lack of a multidisciplinary staff, the variable analyzed in Table 3, we see little difference concerning the professional categories that attend the children in CCAIC when compared with the other public schools, except for the lack of “speech therapist” and “Librarian, Library aid, or reading class supervisor” at the CCAIC. However, the number of enrollments per professional is significantly lower in the CCAIC than in other schools, demonstrating a better service capacity. We should also highlight that, when analyzing teachers’ education, we find a higher proportion of professionals with higher education in the CCAIC in the kindergarten, which is 100%, as in preschool, 91%. In the other public schools, these proportions are 80% and 86%, respectively.

TABLE 3 – NUMBER OF ENROLLMENTS BY PROFESSIONAL CATEGORY IN CCAIC COMPARED WITH OTHER PUBLIC SCHOOLS, ACCORDING TO KINDERGARTEN AND PRESCHOOL IN THE CITY OF DUQUE DE CAXIAS IN 2019

| Professional | CCAIC | | Other public schools | |
|---|---------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------|
| | Kindergarten | Preschool | Kindergarten | Preschool |
| Teacher | 15 | 14 | 19 | 17 |
| Education auxiliary/aid | 7 | 8 | 8 | 38 |
| Nutritionist | 84 | 52 | 317 | 198 |
| Cook and cooking aid | 13 | 8 | 28 | 18 |
| Support and pedagogical supervisor | 23 | 14 | 63 | 22 |
| Librarian, Library aid, or reading class supervisor | Not available | | 1,268 | 69 |
| Community advisor or social assistant | Not available | | | |
| School psychologist | 251 | 156 | 845 | 1,781 |
| Speech therapist | Not available | | 2,536 | 8,906 |

SOURCE: created by the authors based on *Censo Escolar do INEP- 2019* microdata.

When analyzing the data of the *Censo Escolar da Educação Básica* in the period between 2009 and 2019, we see that: i) there was a significant service expansion of childhood education in the public system of the city of Duque de Caxias, nonetheless

there was no expansion in the CCAIC service; ii) there is a change in the school profile of childhood education, privileging the access of children from 0 to 3 years old to schools that exclusively attend kindergarten and 4 and 5-year-old children in preschool with other phases of basic education; iii) the CCAIC attend very young children in a more significant proportion than the rest of the public system; iv) CCAIC's infrastructure are more adapted than the average of the public system; v) the CCAIC have a better structure to offer meals, and attend full-time, what distinguishes them, mainly, in preschool; and vi) in CCAIC there is a smaller relation of enrollments by professional, who have a higher frequency of higher education training but there is fewer differences regarding the professional categories when compared to other public schools.

Limits, tensions, and contradictions of a proposal for an intersectoral policy for childhood education

In the history of Brazilian childhood education, different roles and meanings were built for the institutionalization of young children - assistentialist, compensation, literacy preparation, and complete children's formation. On the assistentialist perspective of childhood education institutions, Kuhlmann Junior (2010, p. 165) affirms that these are: "[...] carriers of prejudice - the neediest, the incapable [...]", hoping to "discipline and ease social relations." It is essential to highlight that these different meanings permeate history, marking out the policies and practices in kindergarten and preschool. The compensatory programs, which did not mean overcoming the assistentialist tendency, have characterized Brazilian educational policies since the 1970s. The design of compensatory service to young children, influenced by multilateral bodies, was the "non-formal" model, with low public investment: inadequate spaces, a lack of pedagogical material, and professional qualification (ROSEMBERG, 2002). Childhood education was a way to compensate for shortages, combat malnourishment, and prepare children for elementary education (CAMPOS, 2009), a strategy to manage poverty.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a group of laws, guidelines, plans, and programs pointed out a new paradigm concerning children and their care, focused on the notion of children as active subjects with rights - who play, wish, want to know, and participate -, a product and a producer of history and culture. These documents affirm childhood education and its specificities, the emergency of a childhood pedagogy, and strengthening the protection perspective toward children. However, childhood policy is marked by disputes.

The history of CCAIC, which starts with *Portal do Crescimento*, shows a service proposal encompassing health, nutrition, and education actions in an effort called the intersectoral approach. However, we need to problematize the understanding of intersectoral and the concepts about childhood education that emerge from these proposals.

At first, with the *Portal do Crescimento*, the work got closer to a non-formal model, with professionals with no training, marked by a preparatory perspective to support children, especially the poorest ones, from possible “learning difficulties” (a term from the project’s text), explained by malnourishment and poverty. The proposal of *Portal do Crescimento* affirms that these children “[...] have a life history that compromises their future performance [...]”; “[...] a past marked by famine, by the lack of health care, often aggravated by the difficulties faced by broken families”. (CORTEZ, 2020, p. 123).

These fragments show a prejudiced view that places poor children under the stigma of incapacity and presupposes the existence of a single standard pattern for children’s performance, considering childhood as a singular, abstract model. The unsatisfactory performance could be understood as the result of shortcomings in parenting and socioeconomic barriers, placing the reason for not learning on children. Compensatory programs foresee grand objectives, from memorization through language to parental guidance regarding children’s education, encompassing assistentialist, medical-hygiene actions, and the indoctrination of virtues (PATTO, 1977).

Besides the nutrition theme, both projects aimed to prepare families concerning their children and combat poverty. According to the CCAIC project, the aim was to reach: “[...] the family core through interventions that guarantee the creation of jobs and income to overcome food insecurity and poverty” (CORTEZ, 2020, p. 134). However, we must critically reflect on the way school traditionally related with the families – belittling their food habits and holding mothers responsible for the lack of care standards (as women are the primary caregivers of young children). Another part of the text presents the following objective: “[...] socially boost these families, giving them the conditions to carry on by themselves in the near future”. (CORTEZ, 2020, p. 135). Thus, a question remains: Can the project deal with the poverty theme in a multifaceted and complex way, avoiding creating prejudices and exclusions? Would the idea of making the families productive be a strategy to “humanize” capitalism? Does this logic favor domination and the maintenance of structural inequalities?

Hence, we must reflect on the normative patterns and the blaming processes produced in kindergarten and preschool. This logic, so common in the childhood education context, educational policies, and programs to attend low-income families, does not allow changes in conceptions (SAWAYA, 2006). Which processes produce the family behaviors considered “inadequate”? Which are children’s and families’ ways to fight and survive? Are there spaces for welcoming, dialogue, and family participation in kindergarten and preschools? About this prejudiced conception, Kullmann Junior (2010, p. 166) talks about the pedagogy of these contexts: “[...] a pedagogy of submission, an education that humiliates to later offer service as a gift, as a favor for the little ones selected to receive them”.

Besides these aspects, the text of the *Portal do Crescimento* mentions studies, without mentioning the sources, which point out that:

[...] children's cognitive, physical, and emotional system is established in their first years of life. When the child has no access to the service of kindergarten and preschools and is not attended by an alternative protection policy, his actions are compromised, interfering with his learning process. Therefore, guaranteeing adequate care during this life phase is crucial for the little ones to be, in the near future, healthy students and, later, healthy citizens and active participants. (CORTEZ, 2020, p. 123).

The *Portal do Crescimento* was extinguished. However, we question the marks of this proposal in the work organization of CCAIC, as this preventive notion is also present in the justification of the document that presents the project. This perspective is closer to the idea that malnourished children suffer mental and physical deficiencies and have cognitive and linguistic deficits, close to the discussions of the cultural deprivation theories. Even if the program considers the poverty context of the children from Duque de Caxias, the text does not show a movement to seek the causes of malnourishment and their consequences as a result of conceptions and actions established from social, economic, and political relations that structure Brazilian society; a phenomenon produced by a scenario of social exclusion. Therefore, we ask: Which cultural goods and social rights have been denied to children and their families? Is it possible to separate the effect of malnourishment on children's bodies from the effects produced by the precariousness of their lives?

This compensation mentality that the education of young children has to mitigate poverty can weaken childhood education as a social right, gaining space in the focused assistance policies, occupying a strategic place to combat poverty and improve school performance. According to Campos (2012, p. 82), there is a "re-politicization" of the concept of poverty "[...] with the introduction of a disjunction between structural conditions that produce it and its manifestation forms". This movement to defend a preventive policy to combat poverty, considering early childhood as an object, is currently updated with neurobiological perspectives (CAMPOS, 2012). These reflections seem timely to discuss the project, still in action in Duque de Caxias.

CCAIC has a pedagogical team⁴ and envisage that children should "[...] be trained by an educational process, holistically and for citizenship [...]" (CORTEZ, 2020, p. 134), emphasizing pedagogical activities with the theme of a healthy diet. In another part of the material, there is a long list indicating that the pedagogical activities will be grounded on personal and social formation divided into self-control, self-concept, interpersonal relationship; basic food care; corporal and environmental hygiene; the value of dialogue; self-confidence and self-esteem; autonomy; oral language; non-

⁴ Currently, the CCAICs have a principal, a pedagogical coordinator, a teacher, a mother-child aid and/or an *Auxiliar de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica* (ADEB- Basic Education Development Aid).

verbal constructions; notions of time and space; coordination and movement, etc. There is a field for processual evaluation, organized into the number of activities, progress indicators, and verification forms. The document indicates a record of “performance by observation and participation” (an expression used in the document). It also points out the need for a final evaluation through reports about the progress and barriers in nutritional, pedagogical, and health conditions. Every year, an annual report should be produced with all the actions developed with the children, their families, and local communities.

About the pedagogical dimensions, it called our attention the lack of Brazilian legal documents that regulate childhood education in the proposal reference and the use of the term “training” [in Portuguese, *capacitação*]. Is this term associated with transmission and preparation for the market? Does the notion of training appear because they understand that the CCAIC children can do less? Another question emerges: what are the possible teachers’ appropriations of this large list without discussion? The text assumes prescriptive characteristics in this format, risking not provoking reflections and other meanings for teachers’ practice. In this same direction, the evaluation of the work with children is in the performance area, distant from the debate about evaluation in kindergarten and preschool (CASTRO E SOUZA, 2017). We can also ask: Are these aspects highlighted in the analyzed document also prioritized in other public units that attend young children in Duque de Caxias?

Another central point is the place of the theme food. According to the project, CCAIC is a municipal public policy of food security and sustainable nutrition aiming to reduce several types of children’s malnourishment between 1 to 5 years old. When reading the document that regulates its organization and objective, and the studies that ground this article, we can see that the theme of malnourishment and food insecurity stand out in this service, possibly indicating a lack of dialogue and a superposition of important themes in the educational work in kindergarten and preschool. There is a lack of elements to think the theme food as a child’s right articulated with others because the pedagogical proposal of childhood education should guarantee: “[...] access to processes of appropriation, renovation, and articulation of knowledges and learning of different languages [...]”, and the right to “[...] protection, health, freedom, trust, respect, dignity, play, sociability, and interaction with other children”. (BRASIL, 2009, p. 18). However, what stands out in the proposal is a perspective that focuses on the lack and the deficit regarding the children and their families.

In this debate, we also have to think about the multidimensionality of feeding oneself (VIANA *et al.*, 2017), extrapolating the physical perspective of nutrients and their relation with the organism. Thus, eating is a complex experience that demands a social and historical focus, problematizing medical knowledge that is the hegemonic reference to discuss the theme. Viana *et al.* (2017) point out the need to relativize the concept of nutrition focused on the energy dimension and the role of foods in guiding

an adequate nutritional diet. The same researchers reflect on the medicalization of food, i.e., a diet based on nutritional rationality and supposedly scientific principles. Within this logic, the subjects' capacity for self-care related to food is belittled, and the place of culture and relationships in this process is underestimated. Hence, food would be a way for a better "existential performance" (VIANA *et al.*, 2017). In this sense, the CCAIC project associated food health with progress. Which implicit sense can be observed in this ideal?

From this debate, we question the maintenance of malnutrition as an enrollment criterion. Enrollment criteria are created because of the State's insufficiency to answer social demands. The principle of difference and reparation guides them in an unequal society. However, we can see a crystallization of these criteria, naturalizing the commitment of constitutional precepts and the equality principle that guarantees childhood education for all children (BRASIL, 1988). Therefore, the criteria do not work in a transitory way, legitimizing the lack of State and selecting mechanisms to access childhood education. The selection criteria should be associated with a broad discussion about childhood and poverty and a plan to expand service, mainly when referring to babies in kindergarten. Nonetheless, we can perceive the invisibility of babies in the policies, and limited and limiting care forms.

This debate gets more complex when assuming that malnourishment and/or nutritional risk is used as a selection criterion. First, we must consider other perspectives to consider the theme of children's food and health. What other questions permeate children's health nowadays? Regarding food, what nutritional disorders in childhood affect the children's population in Duque de Caxias? Is being thin and/or small always a medical problem? Besides these questions, malnourishment encompasses the totality of challenges experienced by children living in Duque de Caxias. The CCAIC selection considers malnourishment as something individual, isolated, and able to be combated outside the context. We need to assume the theme of food from a complex perspective, considering their social and cultural aspects, and, mainly, questioning which exclusion means and preconceptions are produced in this selection process, possibly marking the educational experiences of children and babies.

Therefore, we need to look at the theme of food from a critical and broader perspective, asking: Which are the stories of children and adults with food? Besides this lack, what are their favorite foods? About feeding and being fed, which memories, desires, smells, and textures that children and adult narratives can trigger?

The discussions problematized here about the CCAIC policy, exploring their frailties, dilemmas, and tensions, open space for the debate on the theme of intersectoral approach. According to Cortez (2020) and Martins (2022), the CCAIC does not keep its original organization, not sharing its management and actions with other secretaries. The dialogues have been happening punctually and sporadically. Certainly, this issue deserves to be reflected in the scope of public management: What is the current

effectiveness of this policy? However, this work proposes a deeper discussion, seeking to reflect on this policy's ethical and political unfoldings.

About the "intersectoral" approach, there seems to be an open posture towards the theme, as if it had only one meaning. Akerman *et al.* (2014) point out the polysemy of the term, with different directions, conflicts, and contradictions. The authors indicate the lack of "theories" that consecrate the theme as a research and evaluation category (AKERMAN *et al.*, 2014, p. 4292). Aiming to improve people's lives, we see an effort to integrate public policies, strengthening the importance of horizontal bonds of interdependence and complementarity, considering subjects and contexts in their complexities. The intersectoral effort means the articulation of knowledge, experiences, powers, and sectors, triggering different understandings about the role of the State. However, this is not a simple challenge faced by the fragmentation and disarticulation of policies, besides the divergence of interests and political instability (GÓES; MACHADO, 2013).

According to Jaccoud (2016, p. 23), the intersectoral approach stands out in the actions to overcome poverty.

However, the intersectoral effort can mobilize several perspectives about the role of the State in the social field. As an approach to social problems and as a management tool, the intersectoral approach tends to strengthen a restrictive perspective of social protection when captured and resignified by the severe problem of poverty.

In this sense, the intersectoral approach will imply different management ways and responses. This tension can be observed among the universal policies, targeting all children, and the residual model, which produces social policies that operate elements that limit inclusion and social promotion.

Bringing a critical perspective on access to CCAIC and the conceptions of their educational, social, and political roles does not mean underestimating the childhood situation in Duque de Caxias. Especially after the pandemic period, we see the accentuated impoverishment of the population. In 2022, more than 33 million people faced hunger in Brazil, and only four out of ten families had full access to food (AÇÃO DA CIDADANIA, 2022). In this scenario, there is a great probability that the theme of food permeates the everyday life of public institutions, especially schools. This work sought to question how the CCAIC policy, which emphasizes the combat against malnourishment and food insecurity, has translated social demands. How does this policy dialogue with the rights of children and their families, respecting their histories, cultures, and territories? Which are the effects of the pathways CCAIC takes in the lives of children and babies?

Final remarks

Childhood education integrates social policies, a dispute arena of interests, and the needs of social groups. In the construction of a legal and political structure of what childhood education would be, several knowledge fields, in conflict, bring elements to think about the experiences needed during childhood, with divergent understandings about babies/children, their social role, and that babies and young children need to develop fully. In the case of CCAIC, within a proposal to manage/solve poverty, we problematize the possibility of consolidating a residual policy with a compensatory bias, thought and formulated for a vulnerable childhood that can contribute to creating stigmas – malnourished, aggressive, violent, who cannot learn. In what measure does this policy forge childhood, seeks to sanitize, and control children and families? How does it mark the relationships inside and outside the educational institutions? Thus, it is essential to question the bureaucratic, traditional, and hierarchical structures, distant from the needs of society, and consider children and babies at the center of social policies, strengthening intersectoral answers that qualify actions in unequal contexts in a perspective of rights' guarantee - sensitive to the demands, the contexts, the relationships, the ways of living, and the dreams.

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