

## Curriculum and early childhood education: a systematic review

*Currículo e educação infantil: uma revisão sistemática*

*Currículo y educación infantil: una revisión sistemática*

Carla Ireni Borges Rodrigues<sup>I</sup>

Silvana Boeira<sup>II</sup>

Vanderlei Folmer<sup>III</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This review was undertaken with the objective of knowing how the curriculum of early childhood education has been problematized by national and international researchers. Once the stages of delimitation of the research universe were concluded, the research corpus was constituted of 30 articles, between national and international. After analyzing the productions, they were grouped by semantic approximation, thus originating four conceptual categories: curriculum and early childhood education; the lived curriculum; early childhood education and the Brazilian National Common Curricular Base for Children's Education (BNCC-EI); the challenge of accepting childhood times. The similarity of the identified problems, their aggravating factors, the perpetuation of some of them, having challenged teachers and researchers throughout the history of early childhood education, underlie and provide, in themselves, a rich, forceful and representative material of the reality of early childhood education in the Brazilian and international context.

**Keywords:** Curriculum. Child Education. Systematic Review.

### RESUMO

Esta revisão foi empreendida com o objetivo de conhecer como tem sido problematizado o currículo da educação infantil por pesquisadores nacionais e internacionais, em um intervalo de tempo de 2018 a 2023. Concluídas as etapas de delimitação do universo de investigação, o *corpus* da pesquisa ficou constituído de 30 artigos científicos, entre nacionais e internacionais. Após a análise das produções, foram realizados agrupamentos por aproximação semântica entre eles, originando, desta forma, quatro categorias conceituais para análise: currículo e educação infantil; o currículo vivido; a educação infantil e a Base Nacional Comum Curricular para a Educação Infantil (BNCC-EI); o desafio de aceitar os tempos infantis. A similaridade dos problemas identificados, seus agravantes, a perpetuação de alguns deles, os quais têm desafiado professores e pesquisadores ao longo do histórico da educação infantil, embasam e proveem, por si só, um material rico, contundente e representativo da realidade da educação infantil no contexto brasileiro e internacional.

**Palavras-chave:** Currículo. Educação Infantil. Revisão Sistemática.

<sup>I</sup>Universidade Federal do Pampa, Itaqui, RS, Brazil. Email: carlaborges@unipampa.edu.br  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0531-8152>

<sup>II</sup>Universidade Federal do Pampa, Itaqui, RS, Brazil. Email: silvanaboeira@unipampa.edu.br  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7483-1921>

<sup>III</sup>Universidade Federal do Pampa, Uruguaiana, RS, Brazil. Email: vanderleifolmer@unipampa.edu.br  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6940-9080>

## RESUMEN

Esta revisión se realizó con el objetivo de conocer cómo el currículo de educación infantil ha sido problematizado por investigadores nacionales e internacionales. Una vez cumplidas las etapas de delimitación del universo de investigación, se constituyó el corpus de investigación. de 30 artículos científicos, entre nacionales e internacionales. Luego del análisis de las producciones, se realizaron agrupaciones por aproximación semántica entre ellas, originándose así cuatro categorías conceptuales: Currículo y Educación Infantil; El currículum vivido; Educación Infantil y la BNCC-EI; El reto de aceptar los tiempos de la infancia. La similitud de los problemas identificados, sus agravantes, la perpetuación de algunos de ellos, que han desafiado a docentes e investigadores a lo largo de la historia de la educación infantil, subyace y proporciona, en sí mismo, un material rico, contundente y representativo de la realidad de la educación infantil en el contexto brasileño e internacional.

**Palabras clave:** Currículo. Educación Infantil. Revisión Sistemática.

## INTRODUCTION

Thinking about curriculum is thinking about what truly holds value for life. This statement, although it may seem abstract and simplistic, encapsulates much of the analysis, ultimately, of many of the reflections regarding the concept of curriculum. Thinking about it, from various aspects and perspectives, is always thinking about people, both individually and collectively, about their lives, their daily routines, their aspirations, their struggles, and their place in the world. It also involves thinking about which approaches, reflections, and experiences will truly have such meaning for themselves that they will shape, inspire, move, complement, and transform them. This is why, in summary, thinking about the curriculum is thinking about what holds meaning for life.

This is in spite of the fact that, as a territory of dispute between different conceptions, reflecting on the curriculum implies reflecting on the lives of those who teach and those who learn, with ramifications regarding how teaching, learning, and assessment take place, based on declared and recognized or hidden objectives (Arroyo, 2013). Of all the possible implications and ramifications arising from the topic, it becomes evident early in the journey of inquiry and reflection that the search for the meanings of the curriculum extends far beyond the analysis of content prescriptions, sequenced by age group, cycles, and educational levels, which are ordinarily also referred to as the curriculum.

If we draw on the curriculum when analyzed and tensioned from the perspective of ideology and power (Apple, 2006), on the possibility of offering an alternative to centralized curricular policies (Lopes and Macedo, 2021), on the view of the curriculum as specialized knowledge (Young, 2014), on the curriculum as a space for cultural production (Macedo, 2006), on the critique of the reification of knowledge (Costa and Lopes, 2022), and on the curriculum as identity (Silva, 1999) — to name just a few of the widely cited studies on curricular policies in Brazil — there is already much to explore when seeking to add and contribute through further research and studies, so that this richness and complexity regarding the curriculum take root in schools and fulfill the fundamental objective of every researcher, however utopian it may seem: to improve the world (Lopes and Borges, 2015).

In this systematic review study, the focus was directed toward investigating the curriculum in early childhood education, the first stage of Brazilian basic education (Brasil, 1996). Studies on the curriculum at this stage of education soon reveal that, in addition to the debates provoked by the curriculum theme itself, disputes over what should or should not constitute the early childhood education curriculum are also profuse (Alves and Fialho, 2019).

Observing the tensions that the topic already entails, the peculiarities of early childhood education — conflicting between caring, assisting, and educating, crossed by a legacy of welfare policies, and still permeated by societal and educational pressures for early pre-literacy and schooling — it is noted that debates on the curriculum at this stage of education undoubtedly offer a big challenge to researchers and education professionals.

In light of this scenario and the perspectives that have been cautiously outlined, the objective of this systematic review study was established. It sought to investigate, through international and national databases, the answer to the following question: how has the curriculum of early childhood education been problematized by Brazilian and international researchers? To compose the study, initially, some remarks will be made on the concept of curriculum and the historical contexts related to it, even though it is not possible to define it due to its polysemic nature and because it has layers of complexity that cannot be encompassed in a single concept. Subsequently, the methodology used to select the articles that constitute the review study will be described, and, finally, the results will be presented in dialogue with the texts analyzed.

## BRIEF HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND NOTES ON THE CURRICULUM

Certainly, all curriculum scholars agree with Young when he declares that he is convinced there is no more crucial educational issue than the curriculum (2014). Academic production in the field has also supported this statement and highlighted, as pointed out by Macedo (2006), the intensification of research on curricular policies in Brazil, no longer reliant on foreign studies, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom, although, as the author also notes, researchers continue to dialogue extensively with these texts.

As Young and Macedo also noted a hundred years ago, Dewey emphasized that curricular experiences went beyond written plans and valued the child's experience as the starting point for the "subjects of study" (Dewey, 1965, p. 48). He also inspired some, such as William Pinar, a reconceptualist theorist who, as the term itself suggests, sought to bring new concepts to curriculum studies; and opposed others, like his contemporary often cited for his opposing views, Ralph Tyler, who held a technicist and linear perspective on educational studies (Silva, 2013).

The influence of Dewey, as well as the widespread presence of uncritical and traditional educational trends, did not withstand the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By this time, critiques of capitalist society included in the debate, as expected, a critical analysis of the political control over education system, and of the technicist curricula inspired by the principles of scientific management (Silva, 2006). From the critique to society and its institutions, the school became a central focus, with particular emphasis on the analysis of curriculum conceptualization and policy.

In this context, from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after two world wars, a certain pedagogical optimism that had previously been perceived gave way to radical criticism (Gadotti, 2003), and studies in the field of curriculum followed the history of pedagogical movements. From the perspective of the French philosopher Louis Althusser (1969), the school was seen as part of the ideological state apparatus, while sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron (1970), also French, viewed it as a reproducer of the social structure, and with Claude Baudelot and Roger Establet (1971), it was understood as a dualistic school oriented by the interests of capital (Silva, 1999; Gadotti, 2003; Silva, 2006).

Although the authors mentioned above, who introduced critical concepts into the field of curriculum studies, had distinct theoretical foundations and wrote from different contexts, it can be inferred, as Lopes and Macedo (2011) point out, that their theories and worldviews converge in the way they relate knowledge to human interests, class hierarchy, power distribution in society, and ideology. Critical theories question what is understood as knowledge and what counts as school

knowledge, not focusing solely on a pedagogical dispute, but also including a political and social struggle, of which the school is a part.

From this first rupture brought by critical theories to traditional education theories, which focused on the technician, linear, and pretentiously programmable aspects of teaching, other theories emerged in this scenario, adding to the denunciation of the politically reproductive nature of schools, the possibilities of conflict, counter-hegemonic struggle and resistance (Gadotti, 2003).

Exponents of theoretical productions that incorporated the concepts of conflict and resistance into critical theories, well-known in curriculum studies, include Henry Giroux, with his theory of resistance and radical pedagogy; Michael Apple, with his book *Education and Power*, which more distinctly presents the possibility of resistance as a concept; and Paulo Freire, with his pedagogy of the oppressed (Silva, 1999; Gadotti, 2003; Silva, 2006).

It is well known that Paulo Freire was not a curriculum theorist; however, the problematization of his pedagogy closely resembles or aligns with the approaches of curriculum studies. The same can be said of other critical theorists previously mentioned (Silva, 1999; Gadotti, 2003). Freire, widely regarded as one of the greatest educators of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has had his main work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated into numerous languages. Although he was not a theorist in the field of curriculum studies, it is well known that many researchers and theorists from curricular perspectives have been influenced by his work over time (Silva, 1999).

Traditionally, the study of critical theories is followed by the study of post-critical theories. This term is used to characterize theories that challenge the assumptions of critical theories, which are notably influenced by Marxism, the Frankfurt School, and discussions on the relationships between curriculum, power, and ideology. However, even though curriculum theories are didactically presented and studied from a linear temporal perspective, it is a misconception to interpret this as an evolutionary process — as if traditional theories had evolved into critical theories and then progressed to post-critical theories, as discussed by Lopes (2013). Thus, postmodernism does not represent a linear succession to modernism but rather a departure from it.

It is important to emphasize, however, along with Maria Aparecida Silva (2006), that the historical relationships between curriculum, the world of work, power, ideology, and cultural hegemony have remained a crucial step toward the development of curricular proposals that are more responsive to the demands of human emancipation.

For the postmodern perspective, which marks the end of critical pedagogy and the birth of post-critical pedagogy, it is not only the curriculum that is criticized, it is the critical theory of the curriculum itself that is placed under suspicion, since the critical theorization of education and the curriculum itself is based on the principles of the great narratives of modernity (Silva, 1999).

Despite the imprecision of the expression “post-critical theories”, it is highlighted that it is sought to name a set of theories that problematize the postmodern scenario, and includes post-structural, post-colonial, post-modern, post-foundational and post-Marxist studies (Lopes, 2013). Within post-critical theory, three key terms are considered fundamental: identity, subjectivity, and meaning. For post-critical studies, identity and difference only exist through the presence of the other. Therefore, the curriculum can only be understood through the meaning that each individual attributes to it (Silva, 2013).

Tomaz Tadeu da Silva, in his book *Documentos de Identidade: uma introdução às teorias do currículo* [Identity documents: an introduction to curriculum theories], listed some key terms from each of these major groups of curriculum studies, the main categories of theories, according to the concepts they emphasize. This helps to clarify their key differences:

**Traditional theories:** teaching, learning, assessment, methodology, didactics, organization, planning, objectives, efficiency. **Critical theories:** ideology, cultural and

social reproduction, power, social class, capitalism, social relations of production, awareness, emancipation and liberation, hidden curriculum, resistance. **Post-critical theories:** identity, otherness, difference/ subjectivity, meaning and discourse, knowledge-power, representation, culture/ gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality/ multiculturalism. (1999, p. 17, author's emphasis).

Despite the instability of the postmodern scenario, the decline of grand narratives and foundations, societal transformations, as well as the overlapping of times, contexts, theories, and meanings, a political curriculum project is not necessarily condemned to hopelessness and impossibility. The dubious possibility of giving meaning to postmodernity does not prevent a search for such meaning. "We can dedicate ourselves to it, without losing sight of how unstable, provisional and precarious it is and, therefore, how powerful it is: it is open to being constantly remade in unpredictable ways" (Lopes, 2013, p. 21).

## METODOLOGY

The systematic literature review is a research technique used to evaluate and synthesize the literary work that has been published on a given topic (Carvalho and Ximenes, 2022). "The literature review conducted in this way allows for the replicability of the study and promotes the cumulative nature of scientific knowledge" (Meira, 2020, p. 6).

Review studies are important and contribute to deepening and systematizing the vast amount of scientific knowledge produced by researchers. The aim of synthesizing research is to bring together, in a single work, the results of various studies (Figueiredo Filho *et al.*, 2014, *apud* Meira, 2020), an action that optimizes, especially for the reader, access to up-to-date and scientific knowledge on a specific topic in an objective and efficient manner.

The steps that constituted this bibliographic review work correspond to the basic steps of a systematic review as presented in the study by Mendes and Pereira (2020), which appear in all the works analyzed by these authors. These steps are: objective and research question; search for works; selection of studies; analysis of productions; presentation of the systematic review.

The objective of this systematic review research was to understand how the topic of the early childhood education curriculum is being problematized among Brazilian and international researchers. Based on this initial delimitation, the first stage of this review was defined.

For the bibliographic survey, the second stage to be developed, searches were conducted for peer-reviewed scientific articles in two international databases, Scopus and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), using the English keywords "childhood education" and "curriculum," connected by the boolean operator "AND". The aim of this first stage of the search, using English keywords and conducted in international databases, was to map and understand the work of researchers from various countries on the early childhood education curriculum over the past five years.

Subsequently, a search was conducted in the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) Periodicals Portal using the same keywords, but in Portuguese, and the same boolean operator. This time, the objective was to add a significant contribution from Brazilian researchers, not wrongly assuming that the CAPES library is limited to Brazilian productions, but rather considering that the volume of Brazilian works resulting from this search would be more substantial.

In the third stage, the selection of studies, it was observed that, from the collection of articles gathered through the three searches conducted in the aforementioned databases and in the CAPES library, which will be further detailed in the results section, many articles were discarded for not fitting

within the scope of the research. For example, many of the articles from the initial searches dealt with topics such as the COVID-19 pandemic or very specific areas of knowledge, such as robotics, the environment, the use of technologies, video games, spirituality, etc., as well as other themes that were not significantly related to the question the research aimed to address. This narrowing for analysis was necessary because not all material is suitable for inclusion in a sample, and, in this case, it is better to reduce the universe itself (Bardin, 2011).

To systematize the bibliographic review, a quantitative approach was initially used, since the initial stage of the research consisted of quantifying all the files resulting from the first search, which was carried out following the steps of applying keywords, delimiting the period covered to the years between 2018 and 2023, and applying peer review filters, limited to scientific articles, with full papers available in the database or library.

After this initial quantitative phase, a qualitative stage of research ensued in which, firstly, all the titles of the articles collected were analyzed and, after discarding the articles whose titles did not appear to belong to the scope of the research, the abstracts of these first selected articles were read. Still in this third stage of article selection, after reading the abstracts, some other works were also excluded, for the same reason of not having any connection with the research problem.

For the start of the fourth stage of the research, analysis of the productions, it was first necessary to refine the search until the collection of selected articles for the study provided the necessary material to answer the research objective. To better clarify this filtering process, the table below presents the description of the searches conducted, the keywords used, results, and selected articles.

As shown in the Chart 1, the initial search for articles, based on the application of keywords, operators, and filters, resulted in 590 articles. After reading the titles and abstracts of all the texts from this first compilation, those that were unrelated to the topic under analysis and those that were duplicates (appearing in results from more than one database) were excluded. During this second evaluation, 79 studies were selected. Following this, after careful reading of the full texts, a few more articles were discarded as they still appeared in the list but were not directly related to the research problem.

**Chart 1 – Searches and Results.**

Database / Library	Keywords e Boolean operator	Primary Results	Results after reading titles and abstracts	Results after reading the full articles	Selected
Scopus	“childhood education” AND curriculum	244	53	20	16
ERIC	“childhood education” AND curriculum	123	10	03	03
CAPES Periodicals	“educação infantil” AND currículo	223	16	14	11
Total number of articles selected to form the research corpus:					30

ERIC: Education Resources Information Center; CAPES: Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel. Source: prepared by the authors (2023).

Once the stages were completed, the set of documents to be submitted to analysis, that is, the research corpus (Bardin, 2011), consisted of 30 peer-reviewed scientific articles, both national and

international, addressing the study topic and published between 2018 and 2023. These articles are detailed below in Charts 2, 3 and 4, separated by the researched database.

To develop the fourth stage of the research, which consisted of the analysis of the productions, we sought to rigorously identify points of convergence between the articles, creating a list of topics, reflections, and main conclusions of each work. Afterwards, these excerpts were grouped by semantic approximation, thus creating four categories, which emerged after analogical and progressive classification of the elements, configuring a type of categorization by “collection”, with the conceptual title of each category being defined only at the end of the operation (Bardin, 2011).

**Chart 2 – Scientific articles selected from the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel Portal.**

Order	Author/Title	Journal	Year
1	CIARDELLA, Thais Monteiro; FERREIRA, Marisa Vasconcelos. O currículo prescrito no cotidiano escolar: interpretações de Coordenadoras Pedagógicas da Educação Infantil.	Dialogia	2020
2	LIRA, Aliandra Cristina Mesomo; DOMINICO, Eliane; MARTINS, Lilian. Currículo e planejamento na Educação Infantil: datas comemorativas em debate.	CONJECTURA: filosofia e educação	2018
3	BARBOSA, Ivone; SILVEIRA, Telma Aparecida Teles Martins; SOARES, Marcos Antônio. Educação infantil e currículo: o entusiasmo da cultura e a alegria da criança na superação de uma educação homogeneizadora.	Debates em Educação	2021
4	RODRIGUES, Sílvia Adriana; DE ANDRADE, Erika Natacha Fernandes; DE SOUZA, Dulcinéia Beirigo. O que é específico na educação da primeiríssima infância? Pistas de um caminho formativo a ser (re)construído.	Debates em Educação	2022
5	CUNHA, Myrtes Dias da; SILVA, Cecília Resende. Reflexões acerca da estrutura curricular para a Educação Infantil.	Ensino em Re-Vista	2019
6	LAZARETTI, Lucinéia Maria; ARRAIS, Luciana Figueiredo Lacanallo. O que cabe no currículo da educação infantil? Um convite à reflexão.	Educação em Análise	2018
7	ALVES, Francione Charapa; FIALHO, Lia Machado Fiuza. Currículo na educação infantil: O que pensam os professores?	Práxis educacional	2019
8	DANTAS, Elaine Luciana Sobral; LOPES, Denise Maria de Carvalho. Educação infantil e currículo: um olhar sobre os olhares da produção acadêmica.	Educação	2020
9	TELES, Fabricia Pereira. Transformação curricular em uma escola de Educação Infantil no Piauí pelo viés da pesquisa e formação docente.	Revista Triângulo	2019
10	SOARES, Ademilson. Pesquisas sobre políticas curriculares para a educação infantil: algumas questões epistemológicas no contexto da BNCC.	Debates em Educação	2021
11	VOLTARELLI, Monique Aparecida; FERNANDES, Isabela Signorelli; LUPIS, Jennifer. Entre o proposto e o vivido: diálogos sobre o currículo e os vícios pedagógicos na educação infantil.	Debates em Educação	2022

Source: prepared by the authors (2023).

**Chart 3 – Scientific articles selected from the Scopus database.**

Order	Author/Title	Journal	Year
1	CAMPOS, Roselane Fátima; DURLI, Zenilde. BNCC para a educação infantil: é ou não é currículo.	Currículo sem Fronteiras	2020
2	XIA, Jing; WANG, Mo; ZHANG, Shiya. School culture and teacher job satisfaction in early childhood education in China: the mediating role of teaching autonomy.	Asia Pacific Education Review	2022
3	SILVA, Marcelo Oliveira; CARVALHO, Rodrigo Saballa de. Concepções sobre currículo na Educação Infantil: ressonâncias da Pedagogia da Infância em narrativas de professoras.	Currículo sem Fronteiras	2020
4	SIMS, Margaret; BRETTIG, Karl. Early childhood education and early childhood development: Do the differences matter?	Power and Education	2018
5	ARCHER, Nathan. 'I have this subversive curriculum underneath': Narratives of micro resistance in early childhood education.	Journal of Early Childhood Research	2022
6	PASQUALINI, Juliana Campregheer. Três teses histórico-críticas sobre o currículo escolar.	Educação e Pesquisa	2019
7	SILVA, Fabiany de Cássia Tavares. Estudo comparado: fundamentos teóricos e ferramentas de investigação.	Educação e Pesquisa	2019
8	WOOD, Elizabeth; HEDGES, Helen. Curriculum in early childhood education: Critical questions about content, coherence, and control.	The Curriculum Journal	2016
9	CARVALHO, Rodrigo Saballa de; GUIZZO, Bianca Salazar; LAZZARI, Arianna. Docência na Educação Infantil: das Políticas Curriculares às Práticas Pedagógicas.	Cadernos CEDES	2023
10	CARVALHO, Rodrigo Saballa de; BERNARDO, Gertrudes Angélica Vargas; LOPES, Amanda de Oliveira. Educação Infantil pós-BNCC e a produção do neossujeito docente em documentos curriculares municipais.	Debates em Educação	2021
11	NUNES, Kezia Rodrigues; NEIRA, Marcos Garcia. Currículo e avaliação discente na educação infantil: prática cartográfica dos registros cotidianos.	Currículo sem Fronteiras	2021
12	FERREIRA, Manuela; TOMÁS, Catarina. "O pré-escolar faz a diferença?" Políticas educativas na educação de infância e práticas pedagógicas.	Revista Portuguesa de Educação	2018
13	FONSÉN, Elina <i>et al.</i> Teachers' pedagogical leadership in early childhood education.	Educational Research	2023
14	BIRBILI, Maria; MYROVALI, Alexandra. Early childhood teachers' relationship with the official curriculum: the mediating role of professional and policy contexts.	Education Inquiry	2020
15	COHEN-VOGEL, Lora <i>et al.</i> A missed opportunity? Instructional content redundancy in Pre-K and kindergarten.	AERA Open	2021
16	MORAIS, Artur Gomes de; SILVA, Alexsandro da; NASCIMENTO, Gabryella Silva do. Ensino da notação alfabética e práticas de leitura e escrita na educação infantil: uma análise das três versões da Base Nacional Comum Curricular.	Revista Brasileira de Educação	2020

Source: prepared by the authors (2023).

**Chart 4 – Selected scientific articles from the Education Resources Information Center database.**

Order	Author/Title	Journal	Year
1	WHITTY, Pam <i>et al.</i> Passionate About Early Childhood Education Policy, Practice, and Pedagogy: Exploring Intersections Between Discourses, Experiences, and Feelings... Knitting New Terms of Belonging.	Global Education Review	2020
2	BASSOK, Daphna; ENGEL, Mimi. Early childhood education at scale: Lessons from research for policy and practice.	AERA Open	2019
3	MELASALMI, Anitta; HURME, Tarja-Riitta; RUOKONEN, Inkeri. Purposeful and ethical early childhood teacher: The underlying values guiding Finnish early childhood education.	ECNU Review of Education	2022

Source: prepared by the authors (2023).

## DISCUSSIONS

Finally, after the methodological design of this systematic review, the fifth and final stage of the research was reached, which consisted of the presentation of the systematic review, which is shown in the form of four conceptual categories: curriculum and early childhood education; the lived curriculum; early childhood education and the BNCC-EI; the challenge of accepting childhood times.

### CURRICULUM AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

As the keywords used to conduct this review research already suggest, many contributions and reflections regarding the curriculum in early childhood education were found in the material analyzed. It is interesting to note that many themes appear in several articles, even though they come from different research projects and from different contexts and locations. Among the emerging themes, the significance of early childhood education, fluctuating between caring and educating, the interference of neoliberal political conceptions in the construction of the curriculum, teacher autonomy and the importance of their participation in all processes involving the problematization of the curriculum stand out.

Ciardella and Ferreira (2020) confirm that the curricular debate on early childhood education, post-Constitution of 1988, has been extensive in Brazil, and the advances made have strengthened the space of early childhood education as the first stage of basic education. However, despite the growing attention of teachers and researchers to the topic, Alves and Fialho (2019) suggest that there is a whole problem arising from the complexity of the curriculum category, as well as imprecision regarding the historical conception of children and childhood, which fluctuate between caring and educating.

Dantas and Lopes (2020), in their work evaluating academic production on early childhood education and curriculum, state that this topic is traditionally recognized as controversial. However, it is central to the consolidation of this first stage of Brazilian basic education, as it is to the promotion of quality proposals and institutional practices for childhood. Furthermore, they consider that, in the international context of recent decades, productions and approaches regarding children, with new conceptions about childhood, development and education, have inspired possibilities of overcoming antagonisms between welfare or school-based views of early childhood education.

Among the outstanding themes, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, references to the interference of neoliberal conceptions in education policies were recurrent. The tricks of neoliberal reason, the denunciation of the emptying of problematizations about knowledge and

identity in curricular documents, the objective behind the logic of preparing future employees for the job market, the emphasis on the development of skills and competencies useful to the employer, external accreditations based on defined standards, and finally the consequences, for pedagogy and childhood, arising from neoliberal thinking, were denounced, more explicitly, by Wood and Hedges (2016), Sims and Brettig (2018), Silva (2019), and Archer (2022).

Still regarding the interference of political conceptions in the educational sphere, Soares (2021) also highlights, in his research on curricular policies for early childhood education, the need to also analyze educational policies managed at the municipal level, since it is the municipalities that are legally responsible for the management and execution of this stage of basic education.

Despite the pessimistic scenario and the notes found in the productions regarding the themes mentioned, the possibility of resistance also emerged in the texts consulted. A possibility that emerges from the school floor itself, often less visible, but still occurring in multiple contexts (Archer, 2022). Critically inquiring into the early childhood education curriculum, a critical and reflective teaching practice, questioning trivializing discourses, retrieving the teacher as an intellectual and collective work are some of the directions suggested by researchers so that alternative frameworks of resistance can be visualized (Wood and Hedges, 2016; Teles, 2019; Voltarelli, Fernandes and Lupis, 2022; Carvalho, Guizzo and Lazzari, 2023).

It is important to emphasize, when concluding the notes in this category on curriculum and early childhood education, that it should not be inferred, from the focus on the teaching figure that emerges from the possibilities of resistance, that all these alternatives are situated in a context of culpability. The teacher is not harmed by the legacy of his country's educational policies, by the non-linearity in the evolution of proposals that truly promote educational processes for the people and real contexts in which they live and work, by the interference of powerful groups with selfish interests in the school, which make the struggle unequal.

If the teacher is highlighted as a critical and reflective professional, as a questioner, as an intellectual, as someone engaged in collective struggles, it is because of the centrality of his role in education. Therefore, thinking about teaching autonomy, about critical and authorial training (Carvalho, Bernardo and Lopes, 2023), about a reflective practice, antagonistic to hackneyed and commoditized discourses (Voltarelli, Fernandes and Lupis, 2022), in search of ethical and responsible teaching work (Teles, 2019), does not mean seeing the teacher as responsible for the entire scenario of the play, but rather seeing him as a leading actor in the face of all these challenges.

## THE LIVED CURRICULUM

The category of "lived curriculum" did not arise from an understanding that reflections on it should be considered separately from reflections on curriculum and early childhood education. They were separated here, even if the concepts sometimes overlap, to better highlight the contributions of the articles analyzed here with regard to the experience of the curriculum in schools.

The work of Ciardella and Ferreira (2020), in which pedagogical coordinators of early childhood education were interviewed, provides a significant analysis of how far studies of curricular policies can be from understanding the curriculum that is truly experienced in school. As reported by the authors, the coordinators interviewed stated that the legal frameworks surrounding the curriculum do not reflect the reality of the curriculum as it is lived. The researchers add that these statements confirm their own understanding that schools have a certain autonomy of action, and also operate under the influence of cultural representations so strong that they override the legal changes themselves.

The strong influence of cultural representations guiding the course of daily life and experiences within nursery schools is certainly known and undeniable by those who live in these spaces and even by families who pay attention to their children's portfolios. Conclusive proof of this influence is the

persistence of commemorative dates as content in early childhood schools, when they do not reach other levels, as themes of projects for entire units. This fixation and prevalence of ephemerides in the early childhood education context was also pointed out in the articles in the sample, such as the works of Lazaretti and Arrais (2018), and Lira, Dominico and Martins (2018).

In the work of Lira, Dominico and Martins (2018), the research proposal had the exclusive focus, precisely, of debating the permanence of commemorative dates within the planning and curriculum of early childhood education. The authors reported concerns and worries about how these dates are used in educational institutions, since there is no clarity regarding their place in planning, nor regarding the meaning they would have for children. The researchers also point out that, in both public and private institutions, it has become mandatory for commemorative dates to be part of educational planning.

Lazaretti and Arrais (2018) also argue that this prevalence of commemorative dates as a guiding perspective for the organization of the curriculum in early childhood education is full of controversy and is anchored in the non-formal and non-school origin of care for young children, from a time when curricular issues were not a priority. As stated by Soares (2021), when one hears the saying that, in practice, theory is different, this can be taken as a strong warning regarding educational experiences.

The failure to break with these practices that originated at a time when children's spaces focused on assistance and care has challenged time, educators, managers and researchers. What is clear is that all the problematization regarding the curriculum, sometimes complex and bordering on abstractionism, has not been effective in transforming reality on the school floor.

Furthermore, the overlapping of municipal regulations, often translated into the format of a set of themes to be worked on by teachers in nursery schools, has met with very little resistance in these spaces, as can be seen from the researchers' reports and from a close look at schools. Alves and Fialho (2019) point out that the curriculum is often taken as something instituted, to be applied without further reflection.

It is important to highlight that the lived curriculum cannot simply be perceived as a distortion of the curricular proposals, or as thoughtless obedience to political biases, because, if the lived curriculum can be different, there is also room for resistance to any imposition that denies the autonomy of the subjects of school spaces. As suggested by Xia, Wang, and Zhang (2022), teachers can be encouraged to embrace their potential to contribute to pedagogical reforms and curricular innovations, breaking dependence on higher hierarchical spheres. To this end, as pointed out by Birbili and Myrovali (2020), Melasalmi, Hurme and Ruokonenassim (2022), as well as by Fonsén (2023), teachers need training opportunities in which they reflect on their understanding of the curriculum, think critically about their role in it, and about their potential to decide and question curriculum policies, together with their peers.

To conclude the contributions of the analyzed productions regarding the lived curriculum, it is possible to point out some challenges, together with Silva and Carvalho (2020), within the scope of the curriculum in early childhood education. Firstly, the need to recover the role of the teacher in pedagogical practices, as well as the educational intentionality at this stage of teaching, since there is a collective desire for recognition of professional performance as teachers, and not as caregivers. The second challenge would be the understanding that there is not one model of teacher, and the exercise of teaching is always subject to reinvention.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND THE NATIONAL CURRICULAR BASE FOR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

When researching recent works on early childhood education in Brazil, one theme appears quite recurrent: the BNCC-EI (Brasil, 2017). As expected, since this research also includes a

selection of international articles, the references to the BNCC have specifications outlined in texts by Brazilian researchers.

Soares (2021) introduces the idea that all the fuss surrounding the BNCC-EI in school systems demonstrates how much concepts such as competence and performativity gain space in the educational field. Voltarelli, Fernandes and Lupis (2022) suggest that what draws greater attention to the Base is precisely a certain persistent pedagogical vice towards applicable recipes, age divisions and pre-defined methodological indications. The authors also point out that this prescriptive character is probably the same one that explains the scarce exploration of the National Curricular Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI) by educational institutions, despite their normative character.

The Guidelines were included in the Resolution of December 2009 and, even though they are necessary for the “established purpose of the National Curricular Guidelines for Early Childhood Education to be observed in the organization of pedagogical proposals in early childhood education” (Brasil, 2009), Voltarelli, Fernandes, and Lupis (2022) report that their effects on educational practices were insufficient, perhaps due to the lack of these elements.

This instructional nature of the BNCC-EI, with codified learning objectives, ready to be transposed into individual or collective planning, has even encouraged the search for ready-made lesson plans, aligned with the Base, available on the internet, as verified by Barbosa, Silveira and Soares (2021). The same authors also show that many courses have been produced to instruct teachers to frame their planning in the BNCC-EI. Training courses, of an instructional nature, without theoretical depth and without a concern for promoting epistemological discussions about the concepts contained in the Base.

Another highlight found in the articles referring to the BNCC-EI is the perception of Carvalho, Bernardo and Lopes (2021) about an intense repetition of teaching skills to be achieved, in which the teacher is referenced by a Eurocentric approach to early childhood education. This approach, often based on imported European models, disregards the cultural riches and differences of a plural and continental country like Brazil, when considering education for a child deprived of the singularities of its territory. The “universalization and generalization in which the child was shaped do not encompass the sense that childhoods are different for different peoples and customs” (Santos and Santos, 2017, p. 183). Carvalho, Bernardo and Lopes (2021) also consider that, in the name of an impossible common, the realities of Brazilian cities were subtracted from the text, and the differences of an economically, socially and culturally unequal country were erased. Morais, Silva and Nascimento (2020) add another criticism to the document, pointing out that some omissions in the text contribute to the perpetuation of social inequalities, contributing to the maintenance of an educational apartheid characteristic of Brazil.

Along the same lines, Carvalho, Bernardo and Lopes (2021) also mention having missed the presence of children, with the singularities and differences that constitute them as subjects, and which are paled by homogenizing learning and development objectives. This provision of the document on learning and development objectives, sequenced in order to stipulate what is expected of children’s learning, gives the Base schooling ideas and didacticize playfulness, so that the objectives for each age group are achieved, according to Voltarelli, Fernandes and Lupis (2022).

Common to the researchers listed in this section, in addition to their antagonism towards the BNCC-EI, is the observation that there is an urgent need for a reflective, critical and autonomous positioning of the teaching collective, as they still represent a barrier, from the school doors inwards, to any form of prescriptive imposition that denies the right to individuality and dignity of each child and teacher. Voltarelli, Fernandes and Lupis (2022) clearly demarcate this position when they state that, while major changes cannot be made at the macro level, capable of demolishing durable, normative and cultural structures, all that remains is to rely on reflective attitudes at the micro level.

In the same sense, Carvalho, Bernardo and Lopes (2021, p. 54) indicate the importance of teachers exercising criticism towards established demands, when perceiving themselves as a professional collective that shares the education of children, and whose specificity of the profession “does not fit into a list of prescriptions to be executed, nor into a curriculum whose colonizing force has stripped away the power of the profession”. Soares (2021) also contributes to this debate, adding that both an attitude of absolute denial and that of passive submission would be insufficient to face this game, and to do so, it is necessary to strengthen a critical and proactive stance.

At the end of this section on the BNCC-EI, after listing and discussing the criticisms that the articles that make up the sample bring about the document, and after the direction that the same authors point out as a possibility of confronting any prescriptive norm detached from the experience and autonomy of all subjects involved in the educational system, especially children and their teachers, it is possible to agree with Carvalho, Bernardo, and Lopes (2021, p. 54), when they conclude that “there is always time to produce another discourse”.

### THE CHALLENGE OF ACCEPTING CHILDHOOD TIMES

Another persistent theme found in the corpus analyzed is a denunciation of the bringing forward of primary schooling to the early childhood education stage. The anxiety of professionals and family members, for the child to become literate and to know the universe of numbers, culminates in the skipping of rich stages of child development.

To begin the discussion, Cunha and Silva (2019) have pointed out that there is no normative document establishing that literacy, or mathematical content knowledge, should be taught in early childhood education. Although, as the authors also point out, it is not difficult to find a notebook belonging to a child enrolled in early childhood education that is full of mechanical and repetitive activities, in which the intention to prepare these children for elementary school is explicit, but in a way that advances in time; that is, children are forced to perform tasks specific to the next stage. This perception is also ratified by: Ferreira and Tomás (2018); Dantas and Lopes (2020); Morais, Silva and Nascimento (2020); Rodrigues, Andrade and Souza (2022); Voltarelli, Fernandes and Lupis (2022).

There is a whole set of factors that have supported, favored, and influenced these practices that are still so deeply rooted in early childhood education. To name a few, we can highlight the strong cultural heritage, pressure from families, comparison between colleagues, pressure from local administrations, competitiveness between schools, competition between public and private schools, fear of questioning and breaking with perpetuated practices, lack of critical and reflective continuing education, effectively focused on local contexts and realities, and supported by updated pedagogical studies. According to Rodrigues, Andrade and Souza (2022), it is not unreasonable to state that what Brazilian legal documents have advocated for a long time has not yet reached the education professionals.

Cunha and Silva (2019) also confirm that schools often act in response to demands from society. In this sense, they argue that families need to be made aware so that they do not demand inappropriate results from schools, such as specific knowledge from elementary school. The authors also argue that early schooling values certain objectives to the detriment of others, an attitude that can produce delays in children’s overall development.

To talk about early childhood education is to talk about the first years of a human being’s life and, although the statement is obvious, it needs to provoke deep reflections on what is essential to this stage of life. Would it be crucial to fill the routine of these first years with school tasks and activities to complete, which will already accompany them, exhaustively, for many years in basic education? Or, on the contrary, is it possible to guarantee children the right to discovery, curiosity, relational experiences, play and leisure, which are so extremely important for healthy development, for the maturation of cognitive, motor, affective, and inter and intrapersonal functions?

The rush to make a child a student has an adverse effect on child development, as it hinders the experiences that are fundamental to full maturity. Cunha and Silva (2019, p. 13) reinforce this idea when they state that “play and interactions favor motor coordination, imagination, logical reasoning, vocabulary expansion, among others”. Voltarelli, Fernandes and Lupis (2022) also reinforce this understanding when they report that written language and literacy practices have gone beyond the walls of elementary school and have increasingly entered the spaces and curricular proposals of early childhood education, thus marginalizing other languages: of the body, of art, of sensitivity, of creativity.

Lazaretti and Arrais (2018) add an important understanding to this debate, that is, that thinking about the quality of the experiences lived by children does not mean thinking about an activism that is centered only on the child, but rather considering the child in his or her relationships with the world. They also argue that, if it is through activity that an infant learns and develops, the richness of this process will depend on the quality of intentionally planned mediations, on teaching that is capable of guiding the child to higher levels of development, instigating new motivations, new needs, and new psychic formations.

The factors involved in the already observed and reported difficulty of nursery schools to accept the ideal time for children’s development have been recurrent in the analysis of other problems pertaining to this stage of education. This expansion of the child’s understanding (Dantas and Lopes, 2020), enchantment with their universe (Rodrigues, Andrade and Souza, 2022), free time for them to grow with joy and pleasure (Cunha and Silva, 2019) are some of the specificities and needs of children’s education that have been stifled by adults’ anxiety for results, in a competition where the winners, if they exist, are very distant from those lives enclosed in nursery schools.

When we consider breaking away from a mechanical, competitive, alienated, and alienating reproductive practice brings back to the scene some of the aggravating factors discussed earlier in this text, such as the lack of critical, reality-based continuing education, the demands of managers, the competition between professionals and between the public and private spheres, the difficulty in breaking with perpetuated cultural traditions. In short, there are certainly many aspects that make up a given reality. However, as the contributions of these authors have also brought to the study of the field of early childhood education curriculum, there is always room to think about something new and to act differently. There is a possible path to be taken so that adults can be enchanted by children’s universe, and allow children to express themselves powerfully and fully enjoy all of their rights (Rodrigues, Andrade and Souza, 2022).

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although the owl is the symbol of pedagogy, reflecting on education goes beyond the possibilities of philosophy. If the owl of Minerva<sup>1</sup> always takes flight at dusk and, analogously, philosophy always reflects on what has already happened, thinking about education is a more dynamic, open process with many possibilities. Although reflecting on education undoubtedly involves thinking about the history of human education, this reflection is not fatalistic. On the contrary, it opens space for other alternatives, creates new expectations, provokes, and invites involvement and doing things differently while there is still time. The time to weave something new is the present, until the twilight of an entire generation of education professionals arrives, a time when there will no longer be any possibility of changing the course of history.

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1 In his famous text, Hegel says that “the owl of Minerva takes flight at dusk.” “Philosophy always arrives too late,” he says. Its inherently a posteriori condition resembles Minerva’s bird, which takes flight at the end of the day. Source: <https://instituto-poimenica.com/2012/12/03/a-coruja-de-minerva-levanta-voo-ao-cair-do-crepusculo/>. Access on: April 04, 2023.

From this perspective, upon completing this systematic review, which aimed to understand how the early childhood education curriculum has been problematized, it becomes clear that there is much to consider and reflect upon regarding the various factors that shape the uniqueness of early childhood education. However, beyond bringing multiple aspects of this issue to the forefront, the insights emerging from all the studies conducted also highlight possibilities for resistance, action, and transformation.

The categorization of the 30 articles that comprised the corpus of this study provided valuable diagnostic possibilities regarding the various elements that constitute this mosaic of deeply rooted pedagogical traditions, political interferences and influences, and the need for more critical reflections on the process — both at the macro and micro levels — referred to, albeit not simplistically, as the early childhood education curriculum.

The convergence of ideas among the authors of the sampled articles on the early childhood education curriculum has provided highly relevant and significant contributions to the field. The similarity of the identified issues, their aggravating factors, and the persistence of some of these challenges — which have long confronted teachers and researchers throughout the history of early childhood education as a mandatory stage in both Brazilian and international educational systems — serves as a solid foundation and, in itself, constitutes a rich, compelling, and representative body of material reflecting the reality of early childhood education in both national and global contexts.

The alternatives for resistance and confrontation that emerged from the texts were also abundant. Just as the reference to the owl of Minerva in philosophy at the beginning of this conclusion and its distinction from reflections on education, thinking about the complexity of the educational processes, permeated by lives, historical legacies, and diverse social realities, does not mean bringing it all together in a fatalistic scenario. On the contrary, analyzing the various elements that underscore this complexity means creating possibilities and forging tools for resistance and transformation.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

CARLA IRENI BORGES RODRIGUES is a PhD candidate in science education at the Universidade Federal do Pampa (UNIPAMPA). She is a teacher at the same institution.

SILVANA PETERINI BOEIRA has a PhD in pharmacology from the Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM). She is an adjunct professor at the Universidade Federal do Pampa, Itaqui campus (UNIPAMPA). She is a researcher in the Postgraduate Program in Biochemistry and the Postgraduate Program in Science Education, both affiliated with UNIPAMPA, Uruguaiiana campus.

VANDERLEI FOLMER has a PhD in biological sciences from the Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM). He is an Associate Professor at the Federal University of Pampa - Uruguaiiana Campus (UNIPAMPA). He is the leader of the Nutrition, Health and Quality of Life Study Group (GENSQ), affiliated with the Postgraduate Program in Science Education at the same institution.

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Responsible editor: Andressa Santos Rebelo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1873-5622>

