

# Early Childhood Education and Elementary School in Brazil: Public Policy Challenges in the Time of Expanding Compulsory Schooling

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**Abstract** In Brazil, the inclusion of six-year-old children in Elementary Schools has raised many questions for the educational system. In the process of democratization from the 1980s, teachers, managers, researchers and social movements denounced the precarious situation and to emphasize the urgency of reversing these educational indicators. With the idea that the problem lay in an unequal and exclusionary system, Ministry of Education led to several measures, aiming towards improvements in the quality of education. The country was undergoing a paradigm shift in how the educational process was understood, consolidating and legitimizing distinct areas for day-care centers, pre-schools and Early Childhood Education centers, taking in regard children's individualities and constitutional rights. The inclusion of Pre-school Education in Basic Education contributed to a reversal of Brazilian education's former inequality. Many challenges were raised regarding the transition from Pre-school to Elementary School. This paper focuses in a research concerning routine, interactions, activities and materials in early childhood education institutions, with the aim of thinking about transitions in the organization of education systems. The first section presents conceptions about childhood and Early Childhood Education that guided the research. The second section situates the context of Early Childhood Education in the State of Rio de Janeiro, in a macro perspective. The third section presents, in a micro perspective, the reading and writing practices we observed. Finally, conclusions and considerations on the research are presented.

**Keywords** Early Childhood Education, Transitions in the Organization of Education Systems, Public Policies Education

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## 1. Introduction

In Brazil, the inclusion of six-year-old children in Elementary Schools has raised many questions for the educational system. The commitment of education for Brazilians to extend from four to eight years was established in the 1970s. Education was compulsory between ages 7 to 11 until 1971, and 7 to 14 after that. At the time, there was no democracy in the country, with a pessimistic education scenario for most people: failure, dropout or the lack of places in schools were chronic problems. The issue of inequality was at the core of the debate about school failure, affecting in particular the poor, black people, and residents of rural regions and urban peripheries. Needing to repeat the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup> grades of elementary school reached up to 52.5% of total enrolment[1].

In the process of democratization from the 1980s, teachers, managers, and researchers used in social movements to

denounce the precarious situation and to emphasize the urgency of reversing these educational indicators. With a clear idea that the problem lay in an unequal and exclusionary system, Brazil participated in the 1990 World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, whose major results and common positions were summarized in the *World Declaration on Education for All*.

The commitments thus made by the Ministry of Education led to the following measures, aiming towards improvements in the quality of education: (i) the Decennial Plan of Education for All (1993-2003), elaborated through a broad national discussion with several segments of civil society as well as states and municipalities; (ii) the approval of the Education Law – Lei das Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional – LDB[2], which asserted Early Childhood Education as the first stage in basic education; (iii) the creation of the Development Fund for Basic Education and Development of Teaching (Fundef), in 1997, a strategy to reform the financing and spending for elementary schools' programs, including increases in teachers' salaries. The country was undergoing a paradigm shift in how the educational process was understood, consolidating and legitimizing distinct areas for day care centers, pre-schools

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and Early Childhood Education centers, taking in regard children's individualities and constitutional rights.

The inclusion of Pre-school Education in Basic Education contributed to a reversal of Brazilian education's former inequality. In this process, other changes to public policy were implemented: (i) the inclusion of 6 year old children in Elementary School, extending free compulsory education from eight to nine years duration[3]; (ii) expansion of free compulsory education from four to seventeen years of age, offered to all without access to it at the correct age[4]. Still, in Brazil, the average attendance for children from ages 0 to 3 is 18%, whereas for those between 4 and 5 this percentage rose to 73% in 2010[5].

In Brazil, Pre-school Education is a right for all, offered in nursery schools (for children ages 0-3) and pre-schools or schools (for children ages 4-6), but there are differences in accessibility, prevalence, equipment, and teacher training, both between nursery schools and pre-schools and between Early Childhood Education and Elementary School. The entry of Early Childhood Education into the educational system implicated the following stages, which led to a rethinking of concepts, a review of practices, and a change of positions as a result of the newly established relations. The aim of this paper is to analyze the main aspects of these steps based on research which focuses on practices and interactions between children and adults in public institutions of Early Childhood Education and Elementary School.

Questioning the practices of Early Childhood Education in this research cast a favorable reflection on the inclusion of children aged 6 years in Elementary School. Considering the importance of schools in the education of children and young people, and the difficulties of the educational system in regards to language, reading, and writing, many challenges were raised regarding the transition from Pre-school to Elementary School. In the institutions participating in our research, there were different ideas towards reading and writing. In some, environment, routine, activities, and materials provided cultural experiences. In others, instructional actions. Rather than conceiving these two stages as a dichotomy, this text instead aims to think about transitions in the organization of education systems.

Taking this approach, the first section presents conceptions about childhood and Early Childhood Education that guided the research. The second section situates the context of Early Childhood Education in the State of Rio de Janeiro, in a macro perspective. The third section presents, in a micro perspective, the reading and writing practices we observed. Finally, we present conclusions and considerations on the research we analyzed.

## 2. Childhood and Children in Early Childhood Education

The research projects we have developed hold an interdisciplinary understanding of children, based on

concepts found in Philosophy, Psychology, and Sociology. The critical theory of culture and modernity provides an understanding that children create culture; they play, giving meaning to the world, they produce history, recreating the order of things, and thus establish a critical relationship with tradition. Children are especially prone to seek a workplace where action takes place in a visible way. They feel irresistibly attracted by waste from the construction[6]. According to this conception, art (especially cinema and literature) helps to capture children's point of view and to encourage seeing the world from the point of view of a child.

Historical-Cultural Psychology enlarges this understanding that children overcome their natural conditioning by having a dialogue with history while at the same time being part of history. Children's cultural development corresponds to the construction of a personal history inside social history[7]. Social relations are transformed into mental functions: it is important to understand the social processes acting on a child so they can develop higher mental functions as a result of these actions[8]. Human beings exist due to their relationship with others; in social interaction, the cognitive and affective dimensions cannot be dissociated. When they interact, children learn and transform these dimensions; they are active subjects who participate and interfere with reality; their actions serve to re-elaborate and recreate the world. Adults should be mediators – the role of the other is central for the constitution of the self and in the development and learning that the subjects experience during their lives. Processes manifested during childhood build individual and historical realities resulting in each other's subjectivity[9].

Based on the Sociology of Childhood, we considered the double inclusion of children in society: structural, as a generation, and concrete, as individual historical subjects. Structural perspectives consider childhood as a generational category: children belong to the same age group, at the same time, being affected by the actions of the social structure to which they belong. Interpretative perspectives take into consideration the fact that children belong to the social category of childhood, studying processes of subjectification in their interactions with adults and their peers, recreating the cultures they are part of[10-12].

It is consensus and a matter of law in Brazil that children of all races or ethnicities, religions, social classes, origins, places of residence, and gender, regardless of their parent's conditions, are entitled to quality education to broaden their development, their cultural universe, the makeup of their subjectivity and their self-esteem. Educational practices, in all kinds of institutions, should respect and welcome children in all their differences; they should be led to understand that they are citizens entitled to protection and social participation, cultural experiences combining knowledge from experience that are the result from the children's experiences and knowledge being part of nature, cultural production, and heritage. Language and play articulate different forms of knowledge and ideas. Institutions and adults should favor play, seen in this way as cultural

experience and a privileged form of expression for children. Children are entitled to attention, “*protection, life and health, through the execution of public policies that allow for a healthy birth and a harmonious development in dignified conditions of existence*”[13]. Children “*are entitled to freedom, respect, and dignity as individual persons in a process of development and as subjects of civil, human and social rights guaranteed by the Constitution and laws*”[13].

In Brazil, Early Childhood Education can be understood as an indivisible whole, institutionalized in educational spaces at nursery schools, pre-schools, Early Childhood Education centers or schools. This option imposes conditions for pedagogical practice, for working with children, for teacher training, and for the transition to Elementary School. Institutions for Early Childhood Education should organize their pedagogical proposals with consideration for the curriculum as a set of cultural experiences, articulated by ideas from practice and knowledge which are part of cultural heritage in regard to human development. These institutions should favor access to cultural goods and practices, contact with nature, and an expansion of learning experiences. Following that will be the development of cultural education for adults and children via knowledge of one's self, others, and the world, in a movement highlighting autonomy, collaboration, and the children's productions. Early Childhood Education takes children themselves as reference, and the context in which the pedagogical practice is performed[14].

Benjamin (1987a, 1987b), Bakhtin (1988a, 1988b) and Vygotsky (2009)[15-19] influenced our conception of children as producers of culture shaped by of their social class and ethnicity, with gender, physical, psychological, and cultural differences. Their cultural development involves building personal history within social history. Children are affected by actions of the social structure in which they belong and, in the interactions with their peers and with adults, they recreate the cultures in which they are immersed. These concepts have guided the research about the policies and practices described below.

### **3. The State of Rio de Janeiro: Early Childhood Education in Macro Perspective**

Advances in public policies in Brazil and the democratization of access to school have been visible in the country by evidence of increased enrolment and improved quality of municipal and state education systems, mobilized by social movements and in legal and institutional changes produced above all by the federal government.

In order to assess the Early Childhood Education of the municipalities of the State of Rio de Janeiro, a study of educational administrations was performed in the 92 municipalities in the state over the course of 10 years[20]. We compared data collected from the municipal departments of education regarding the management and training of

professionals between the years 1999 and 2009. The longitudinal study shows evidence of progress: increased enrolment in public nursery schools and better organization and functioning of the departments in regards to the specificity of education and the pedagogical supervision teams monitoring Early Childhood Education.

The data analysis takes into account that existing configurations are the result of experience, the historical and political contexts of the municipalities, relations with the state, the Federal Government, and civil society. During the decade under study, municipalities were very concerned about the involvement of a team working directly with children ages 0-6 in educational projects, which indicates an increased investment in the training of these professionals.

However, several aspects still need urgent attention in public policy agendas: the cultural education of teachers, specific tenders for pre-school teachers, the inclusion in the workload of specific time used for planning and training in service, salary raises, and democratic processes for the appointment of directors, especially in nursery schools.

In the State of Rio de Janeiro, at the beginning of this study (1999), there were 1,611,584 children from 0 to 6 years of age, two fifths of which were in the age group of 4-6, with an educational coverage of 52%. At the end of the decade studied (2009), there were 1,620,017 children, half of which in the age group of 0-3, 16.1% in nursery schools (0-3 years) and 66.2% in Pre-schools (4-5 years). Considering the total enrolment in Early Childhood schools, there was an expansion of 14%, caused by enrolment in nursery schools. This fact concerns, on the one hand, investment of the public service in this sector and on the other, the circulation of ideas about the importance of education in early life.

In considering proposals from governments who have pledged to use education as a means of building democracy, Cunha (1992) brings forth key issues to understand the forces which drive or hinder (social movements, privatism, communitarianism, municipalism), discerning that “*finding a formula to enable administrative continuity of departments of education and a certain independence of the owner, without this implying de-politicization or techno-bureaucratic domination in the sector*”[21] is one of the measures necessary for the creation of public schools to replace governmental schools under private management. Although there was a reduction in private sector participation to providing places in nursery schools, it is clear that, from the total nursery enrolment, 42.7% are still allocated for this sector, which also participates with 36.9% of pre-school enrolment.

Different management conceptions were revealed in the study. Both quantitative data and interviews show the implications of these ideas for educational public policies developed by local governments. This exercise in understanding municipal functions has some points in common, differences, contradictions and ambiguities.

A first point refers to how long it takes to implement pedagogical proposals and to evaluate their results. It is evident that the management teams of municipal systems

need certain administrative stability and decision-making power to perform what they propose; they should not be split up or reduced with each new administration, as unfortunately still happens. At the municipal level, education has not been treated as a State policy, above mandates or political parties and their time of action. Thus, criteria for the formation of a management team which takes as a principle the training, experience, and knowledge about the system and its area of operation are other aspects of the study. In this case, the lack of transparency in the appointment of directors for public nursery schools represents a serious obstacle: the study revealed that, over the decade, there was an increase in the appointment of directors by nomination and a reduction in the number of professionals elected to office, despite the legal principle of public education's democratic management in force since 1988. According to Brazilian Education Law[2], the education system is obliged to value the professionals of education, who should join the public service through public tenders with tests and titles, with the right to continued professional development, professional base salary, career progression based on title or qualification, and a period reserved for studies, planning, and evaluation to be included in the workload with adequate working conditions.

Considering the variety of training levels of Early Childhood educators and the diversity of municipal contexts, there appears to be a number of simultaneous, contradictory positions and notions about different forms of Early Childhood Education in different environments. Thus, the research provides some indications for resizing practices to ensure minimum conditions of consistency of service in tune with the valorization of human relations, thereby reducing everyday instrumental and training practices. In-service training is necessary not only to improve professional activities, but also to guide and add value to the teaching profession, since it is through dialogue that these educators build knowledge and re-signify the practice.

It is important to consider the collective dimension of education, that is, to encourage nursery schools and pre-schools to think about and discuss the advancement of their work with young children. It is in the community where the role of managers and teachers gains strength, leading the group to seek new forms of organization, working conditions, as well as to reformulate theory and social practice. In this sense, it is relevant to think about the professionalization and social recognition of Early Childhood teachers in the proposals of training in the municipalities, so that they invest in the articulation of their policies of Early Childhood Education and teacher training.

Gathering research, policy, and educational practice can be a viable strategy to ensure progress and innovation within the training proposals of public systems.

#### 4. Interactions and Practices in Nurseries, Pre-Schools and Schools

In order to identify and understand actions, interactions, practices, values, concepts, prejudices, power distribution, relations of authority, and diversity, from 2006 to 2008 we conducted case studies simultaneously in three nursery schools, three pre-schools, and three elementary schools. The methodology included: observation, interviews, interactions based on cultural productions, and photography of the rooms, objects and interactions. The theoretical study and empirical research were performed under an interdisciplinary perspective that brought together language studies and cultural studies with the sociology and anthropology of childhood. The extensive and dense material collected in these studies has also been analyzed in doctoral theses, master's dissertations, specialization monographs, and several other publications.

This item focuses on speech, reading, and writing in the practices observed in the nursery schools, pre-schools and schools we researched, based on a theoretical framework which sees language as central to social interactions, development, learning, and building knowledge. Language is linked to imagination, creation, dialogue, expression of knowledge, feelings, values; it builds consciousness and organizes behavior: in it and through it concepts and prejudices are assimilated.

Language and life are inseparable[22]. In the interplay between self and other, the multiple discourses constituting us are in conflict. Researches in the Humanities, from this perspective, renounced the illusion of transparent discourse both for the subjects researched and the researchers themselves. But the illusion of transparency thus renounced should not be confused with a renunciation of theory or conceptualization.

In this research, discourse analysis was performed within the tension between singularity and universality. The facts gathered in the field were dealt with regarding this tension: they enunciate what is singular in the work in schools of Early Childhood Education, Elementary School, and in transition strategies and are included in the broader contexts of policies and training.

The ways adults and children communicate have been marked by ambiguities in the different ways a teacher acts and interacts with her class, alternating dialogue and imposition, warmth and harshness, respect and mockery, affection and authoritarianism. The way many children were named by adults among themselves, in different institutions – where several children were called *Nem*[*Neither*] and many went to school without knowing their own names – is cause for concern. This undifferentiated treatment seems to characterize the anonymity to which other actors in the school environment are subjected, where teachers are called *Aunt*, the fathers *Dad* and the mothers, *Mom*.

There were teachers who developed a relevant work about the children's names (rhyming, singing, identifying with cards), recognizing and differentiating the children, but many treated the children impersonally. "*Psiti*," "*psiu*," *another*, *hey*, *you boy*, *girl*, *little friend*, *little one*, were expressions used by adults to call children who became

anonymous as a result. In one of the institutions, the children came out of anonymity when the teacher, when reprimanding or in situations of learning difficulties, said their names aloud. Some teachers referred to themselves in third person (auntie is speaking, Mary wants you to...). The self seemed to be hidden under the impersonality of the third person of the discourse, disrupting the possibility of a direct dialogue between "I" and "you," the individuals who were interacting.

The physical distancing of adults in relation to children has been observed in the organization of the room, body posture, as well as clothes and accessories. Teachers behind desks, sitting on chairs – while the children were on the floor in a circle – high heels, tight skirt and a purse under the arm, preventing movements, were scenes that caught the attention of researchers in different institutions.

Often the children pulled at the researchers, drawing attention by offering presents, drawings, offering their hands to be held when walking inside the building, talked and asked about what they were writing. There were similar expressions from teachers: complaints, confidences, requests for help, advice or support on how to do their job and also expressions of joy caused by the presence of the researchers marked the dialogues of the teachers, to whom we paid attention.

In regard to the acquisition of knowledge, almost all teachers repeated gesture and movement patterns which confirmed what the children said. Questions were linear and predictable, seeming like gaps to be filled. Even in a circle – a place for warmth and exchange – speech did not ensure dialogue for the children. A nod in agreement or a "great!" indicated that it was another's turn to speak, giving the impression that the teacher listened very little to the children and was not really interested in the dialogue, questioning or expressing of points of view.

There were actions which provoked the children's interest for knowledge. Their eyes shone especially when a teacher developed a project, when the movement generated by the theme created a link between the activities which made sense to the individuals. Frequently the curricula revealed themes connected with holidays or religious feasts (Identity, Easter, Christmas, St. John's Day, Mother's Day, Children's Day, Folklore, Springtime). The approach in most cases took place uncritically, connected to the well-known, common sense, or mass media. If "*quality education should help the student go beyond the references from their everyday world, assuming and expanding it, becoming, thus, active subjects in the changes in their contexts*"[23], the institutions analyzed in this research, Early Childhood Education and Elementary Schools, have had difficulties fulfilling the task of expanding the references for children in order to offer them the opportunity to transform themselves and their environment.

Adultcentrism predominated. On the walls of the classroom, works by teachers stood out: drawings, panels, mimeographed sheets, origami, sentences, and poems. Activities with language showed that the teacher's

educational intentions not always expanded the possibilities for children to imagine and create themselves.

Many reading and writing activities were conducted with an emphasis on the alphabet, even in day care classes. Some presented letters in sequence; others brought drawings or magazine cutouts illustrating each letter. Calendars and attendance lists were frequent in classes, often divided by gender: figures of a boy and a girl above each column indicated the classification of the cards. Most teachers called the roll with cards with the children's names. Some invented games and variations, others followed routines. Afterwards the cards remained visible for consultation.

There were books in the rooms; baskets and small shelves to store and/or exhibit library books, or reading nooks. Moments for reading and telling stories were also observed, but they served most often as ways to lead off directed activities. Teachers did not read stories every day and the children rarely had the opportunity to browse, choose, or read what they wanted.

The teacher's control and direction often lost the character of collaboration and became tutelage instead. Pedagogical practices reflected the work performed in the rooms (called "classrooms" even in many nursery schools), where adults and children talked about the things they learned, and in which way they did or did not share. By rethinking tensions and contradictions, they revealed the practice of reading, writing and other forms of expression present in the institutions, outlining a framework in which dominant instructional practices were constituted from the teaching of predefined contents, repetition, models to be imitated, gestures, attitudes and abilities to be learned, all with rigid forms of education and a strong presence of a school culture emphasizing routines, waiting times, queues, and forming groups by gender.

The challenge was to be attentive, understand the language beyond what was said, understand the meanings of body movements, tensions and apprehensions, the meanings of crying, laughter, conflicts, demonstrations of affection, anger, and sharing. In many institutions, the children were visible, but in others invisibility was the rule. The limits imposed by adults denied interactions, limiting and restricting the action during play. Children were controlled even at parties. The theoretical contributions from critical cultural theory, anthropology, and the sociology of childhood hovered over them, too broad to be applied. Despite the theoretical advances, and the changes in public policies and curricular proposals, instructional practices predominated focusing on teaching, even for very young children.

In this contemporary world in which we experience a coexistence of different ideas about childhood, education, and knowledge itself, ambivalences and paradoxes in the relations between adults and children (right and tutelage, freedom and control, inclusion and exclusion) provoke behaviors where children are either considered from the perspective of being faulty, or from the perspective of being competent. The difficulty in breaking a mechanical and

linear view of history was also present in working with children and their development. Children live in the present in the inter-relationships they have with the countless others who shape them. Thinking about their actuality in the interweaving of past and future[15] provides a rethinking of Early Childhood Education and Elementary School. This is what the last section will focus on.

## 5. Conclusions and Considerations

The analysis of public policies and our practices of observation suggest reflection and action. Our group has been engaged in the supervision and training of the three dimensions of human culture: knowledge, art, and ethical action. Training teachers and managers to work with 6-year-old children in Early Childhood Education and Elementary School with consideration for those three dimensions is a challenge. Scientific knowledge and access to cultural production and the creation of cultural perspectives must be guaranteed[24].

Early Childhood Education has a central role in the development of readers to guarantee the children's right to oral and written culture, various discursive genres both oral and written (especially narratives) and various media (particularly books) for children to establish a positive relationship with language and writing and develop a desire to learn how to read and write, to acquire a taste for listening to readings, to have access to literature, to intend to become readers, and to trust their own possibilities for development. This role is linked to the inclusion of children in written culture: literacy, a goal of the first years of Elementary School, regarded as the entry into a world of writing, cultural action for freedom, and the practice of freedom[25],[26].

Elementary Schools and their professionals serve to ensure that children and adults read many discursive genres, whilst having access to writing standards and rules. Until the fifth year of Elementary School, children, young people, and adults have the right to read proficiently and write correctly, overcoming their fears and producing meaningful texts, expressing their own ideas, feelings, plans, and desires. Ensuring that all are able and have the intention to read and write, and have the conditions to do so, are achievements of Elementary School.

In addition, Early Childhood Education and Elementary School institutions need to include in their curriculum strategies for the transition between the two stages of Basic Education to promote the acquisition/construction of knowledge and the creativity and imagination of children and adults.

Researchers have demonstrated that mechanical and instrumental practices are prevalent in Early Childhood Education and during the first years of Elementary School. A conception to take language as an object, a set of data, rules, and regulations is prevalent. Teachers behave as if the most important thing to teach was grammar. Orality, graphic and

visual expression, theatre and literature are little explored and a great deal of emphasis is given to motor training, repetitive exercises, and copying. However, language is alive, it spreads, changes and has a history[17]. To favor the role of Early Childhood Education and Elementary School in the development of readers, institutions of both stages of Basic Education should expand aesthetic experiences with music, visual arts, cinema, photography, dance, theatre, and literature. Based on the results, we can say that instructional, informative, mechanistic and instrumental actions should be replaced by the cultural development of teachers and managers[28],[29]. To this end, public policies should ensure access to physical spaces (libraries, reading rooms) and time (to read, study and plan).

The three dimensionality of human culture is the tripod of education for the children and adults (teachers and managers) of Early Childhood Education and Elementary School. Practice reports provide material for the analysis of problems and conflicts and to reflect on ways to address them. Theoretical study contributes to rethinking practice alternatives and creating forms of collaboration.

The biggest challenge, however, lies in the ways these three dimensions are combined. Scientific knowledge, art, and ethical action are in practice intertwined, in the way in which teachers and managers plan and face problems. The generational imbalance between adults and children deepens the requirement for ethical behaviour among subjects. Speaking, listening and being heard, keeping relations of affection, care, respect, exchange and mutual trust are prerequisites for interpersonal relationships.

Language is a material and an instrument of action in the world and with the other. By acting, we produce discourses and are in turn produced by them. It is through the use of language that individuals relate to culture by producing meaning in the interactions they establish. The language of children is imbued with the trademarks of their original social groups, values, and knowledge. Ways of speaking and acting are ways to interpret reality. Focusing research on actions, productions, and appropriations of children made it possible to understand the complexity not only of language, but also of the work made with language in Early Childhood Education and Elementary School.

Schooling is based on a knowledge model that separates science, art and life, and also on the control of knowledge with pre-determined and predictable solutions. It is urgent to shift pedagogical practices, management and training methods – both in Early Childhood Education and Elementary School – away from this model to instead favor the creation of the unique meanings constituted in historical events. Moreover, it is fundamental to define strategies for transition between stages. Acting on transitions can contribute to the creation in the rooms of the Early Childhood Education and Elementary schools for narratives which promote personal, institutional, and political changes.

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