

Family and School: Challenges for the Creation of a New Way of Looking at Work with Early Childhood in the Education Network of the City of Rio de Janeiro

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Abstract

There is much to be explored about the relationship of families with school regarding the use of educational institutions for children up to six and the effective co-responsibilities in the whole development of the child. Analyzing aspects of this which permeate public institutions for Early Childhood Education was the focus of this research, which discusses types of access, the expectations of families and actors involved with public institutions in the network of schools in the city of Rio de Janeiro, and the educational and social function of this stage of learning. The article focuses on the inclusion of children in the educational institution, based on on-site observation in two public institutions that use differentiated policies for child care: the first, under the aegis of the Full Early Childhood Program ("PIC") targeting children up to three; the second being developed in the Child Development Center ("EDI") conceived as a new model for early childhood education, bringing together in the same space children up to six. In addition to observing these two policies for working with children, school administrators and families were interviewed. It transpires that, in some situations, the school adopts attitudes that reinforce social and cultural differences; in others, the school is working towards maximizing its ability to produce new ways of giving quality care to the population.

Keywords

Public Policies, Family, Childhood Education

1. Introduction

Access for Brazilian children to early childhood education institutions (crèches for under 3's and preschools for

4 and 5-year-olds), the first stage of Basic Education, is a fundamental guarantee of rights for all citizens starting at birth, consolidated as an integral part of public education policy by the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988 (Brasil, 1988). However, equal and universal, especially in the context of childcare, faces many barriers, in view of the disparity in terms of access by the population to educational services in different regions of the country. Place of residence, race and household income all demonstrate the existence of different ways that childhood is experienced in Brazil. This situation reinforces the responsibility of government and public policy as regards the induction process and consolidation of early childhood education institutions, the education systems and, consequently, the training of teachers, the designing of educational centers for young children, and the development of a pedagogical purpose which is shared by families.

Public policies are the “the State in Action”, that is, the state government implements a project through programs and actions aimed at specific sectors of society (Höfling, 2001). Education is a social and public policy and represents the actions taken by the State to ensure (or not) the enforcement of rights and the redistribution of benefits, aimed at resolving the inequalities produced by a society that in the past bothered little with social protection for the entire population.

Looking at creches as an educational tool is still a provocative question when discussing their integration into education, unlike pre-school, which has been on the agendas of educators and Brazilian educational policy since the 1970s, albeit in a somewhat marginal and residual form, in terms of school places, and justified as a preparatory stage for elementary school.

The Ministry of Education decided that the inclusion of Early Childhood Education as the first stage of Basic Education can contribute to the reversal of the historical inequality of Brazilian education and, in the midst of the changes initiated from the 1988 Constitution and the Law of Guidelines and Bases for National Education (Brasil, 1996), other measures were implemented. Among them, we can highlight the expansion of compulsory and free education from the age of four to seventeen, also guaranteed for all those that did not have access at the appropriate age.

A creche or nursery, designed for children up to 3 years of age, since it does not qualify as compulsory education, faces a number of challenges related to the commitment of the public schools network in offering places and quality services. The average attendance for Brazilian children up to 3 is 22%, whereas for 4 and 5-year-olds (mandatory ages) this percentage rises to 80% in 2012¹, corroborating the importance of mandatory access (or not) for the population. Studying family-creche interactions is a subject that can help to bring these institutions to a place of relevance for the educational scene.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to analyze aspects which permeate public institutions for Childhood Education, based on a piece of research entitled “The place of the family in the creche and the challenges of creating access to education institutions for young children”². In this research, there is a discussion of forms of access, the expectations of families and actors in the public institutions in the network of city schools in Rio de Janeiro, in addition to the educational and social function of the creche.

With this focus, the first item below gives the context of Early Childhood Education in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro, with a macro perspective, based on the Full Early Childhood Program (“PIC”) and the Child Development Center (“EDI”) and their relationship with the child’s family. The second item presents the practices observed in a PIC module and in an EDI center, with a micro perspective. The third section offers recommendations for the formulation of a policy for Early Education, which is more relevant for the children and families who are part of it.

2. Politics of Early Childhood Education in the City of Rio de Janeiro: The Inequality of Rights

The city of Rio de Janeiro has a population of around half a million children at an age where they could be receiving Early Childhood Education (up to 5 years of age). According to data from the Municipal Education (SME) 139,216 children are enrolled in public education-67,755 in creches and 71,461 in pre-school centers. It is worth noting that 25% of the creches are part of accredited institutions (<http://www.rio.rj.gov.br/web/sme>).

The field of research in this article was in two educational areas: 1) the first is situated in a creche, with a fo-

¹IBGE. PNAD, 2008.

²This piece of research is related to the Masters dissertation of Rosane Monteiro Gomes, under the orientation of Professor Maria Fernanda Rezende Nunes.

cus on the Full Early Childhood Program (PIC), which is geared towards families whose children are not enrolled in creches and who only have access on Saturdays; 2) the second is a Child Development Center (EDI), characterized by the municipal education secretariat as a concept for offering educational care to the Rio de Janeiro network for children in the Early Child Education system. These areas are seen as forms of entry by children into the public school system.

The PIC was launched in 2009 by the SME (Municipal Education Secretariat), in partnership with the Municipal Health, Civil Defense and Social Welfare Departments, aiming to offer care on Saturdays to children aged from 3 months to 3 years and 11 months who are not enrolled in creches, mainly due to the lack of places to meet rising demand. In this sense, the program is an alternative and complementary strategy for children at this age who are not enrolled in a creche or in a nursery or in a Child Development Center (“EDI”).

However, from information collected during research (2010/2012), the information about the PIC is imprecise and changeable, ranging from the distribution of videos and booklets for all administrators (2010), advertising on the radio and open television channels, to the removal of information in the secretariat website. The entry criteria also suffer changes: initially intended for everyone and by the end of the study conditional on participants being enrolled in the Rio de Janeiro Family Welfare (“Bolsa Família”) Financial Assistance Program. According to the website of the secretariat, in 2010, there was a plan to implement the program in 10 creches, one per Regional Coordination Headquarters for Education, although with the goal of reaching 100 municipal institutions. In February 2012, from the first contacts with the municipal creche working within the PIC, the director tells us that initially the program assured the family that the child’s regular participation in activities and the parent or guardian’s attendance at the lectures would be sufficient to ensure enrollment in the creches, but this assurance never came to fruition, given that the program has since undergone changes (Gomes, 2013).

The Program provides for intersectorial work with representatives of the sectors for health, social care and the creche team responsible for organizing lectures for the participating families. The activities are offered on Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., when, for one hour, families receive guidance on health and education, based on video resources and printed materials that address the topics proposed. With this material, it is expected that the technical knowledge and scheduled guidelines will be discussed by setting up a “conversation wheel” for those attending and opportunities for the participants to record their ideas on the subject discussed. The conversation wheel is defined as:

(...) A technique used between groups, which facilitates listening and talking to each of the participants, who sit together in a circle (wheel) to talk. Almost all the problems that arise in a creche can be discussed there, whether they are doubts, fears, wishes, proposals etc. (...) In general, whatever is agreed in the “wheel” is by common agreement among the participants and helps establish a routine where everyone feels responsible for commitments made (http://multirio.rio.rj.gov.br/aluno/images/Pic/sobre_o_pic.pdf).

The EDI was planned in the same year as the PIC, 2009, to meet creche and pre-school needs, i.e. children aged from 3 months to 5 years and 6 months, with the goal of offering educational activities that recognize and validate the whole child, i.e., their physical needs for growth and psychological and emotional, educational and cognitive development as well as their wishes and interests. Since then, according to the website of the secretariat, 128 EDI’s have been created.

Our fieldwork began by looking at the enrollment records of children at an EDI and those enrolled in the PIC, both research institutions. This work allowed us to outline a profile of households and the number of children, by age group, waiting for places in mainstream creches and those in the EDI. The observations in the classroom, with the children and staff, and participatory interviews with families, took place over a period of 10 months in 2012. With an aim to listen sincerely, the records of events often went well beyond the walls of the institution:

Early in the school year, when I was on the bus bound for the EDI to watch the children going in, I heard from the seat behind me the following dialogue:

“Promise to Mummy that you won’t cry? Mummy has to go to work. Don’t cry to the nice ladies, ok? They don’t deserve it. And anyway, you have your little friends. Then I’ll pick you up we can play together” (Gomes, 2013).

Listening to this mother, talking her baby who was no more than one year old, one is led to ask the following question: are the creches in public establishments thought of as schools with small children or schools for young children? The change of the preposition (with-for) makes all the difference. As we bring together conversations and arguments heard in the field, capturing the feelings and revealing the unspoken values there, it is possible to walk the paths of dialogue leading to the concepts and objectivity required for the creation of a relevant know-

ledge base.

For entry into the Full Early Childhood Program or the Early Child Development Center, families have to fill out the same form, the Student Registration Form. With these records³, it was possible to trace the number of children, by age group, who were waiting for a place in a mainstream creche and those that were in the EDI. Comparing the percentage of babies between 7 and 18 months enrolled in the PIC (71%), waiting for a place in the EDI, with those enrolled in the EDI (25.4%) it was easy to see a marked discrepancy between demand and the capacity of absorption of small children by the regular education network. This finding led to questions which, in the field, produced new material for interviews and discussions. The next section examines the practices observed in a PIC area (“space”) and in an EDI center and aims to question and comment on educational policies.

3. Administration and Access in Early Childhood Education: Matches and Mismatches

Listening to the administrators of institutions that were observed and the people responsible in group interviews and the observations of the early days of entry of children into the EDI and PIC, a diversity of opinions emerged. The materiality of the real world far exceeds the ability of the researcher to talk about it, scrutinize it, and it is this wealth that the humanities and social sciences offer. *Amorim (2001)* presents a dialogical approach applied to them. On the one hand, according to the author, the object of the research that is to be understood is “the object already spoken, the object to be spoken and the speaking object” (2001: p. 19). The researcher assumes the position of talking about it while participating directly in this polyphonic relationship. On the other hand, the author includes silence as another possibility for expressing alteration and it is from the interplay of speech and silence, text and subtext, that meaning is created. Thus, dialogue is, by definition, unending. Given these considerations, below are some events that express a broken and ambiguous line, but which offer meaning to help rethink school as a place for small children and the actors involved in this context.

The Director of the EDI, when asked about the profile of children attending the institution, explained her views on enrolling babies under 7 months:

“I think it absurd to take care of babies of this age. Children already spend a lot of time away from their family. Mothers have to work like all of us, but we always find a way, right? The baby needs the warmth of family.” She concludes: “Some mothers want to spend as little time as possible with their children. That’s why we see these children who don’t care about anything, running wild” (*Gomes, 2013*).

The Deputy Director of the EDI also offered her opinion about enrolling babies:

“The EDI needs more places for pre-school. There are places for the creche and the kids go from the crèche to pre-school, with not much chance of places being open for the other stages. I think it’s wrong to increase the number of creches. They are going to open more pre-school classes at the Sambódromo (the arena where the Carnival parades are held)” (*Gomes, 2013*).

The director tells us that at the opening of the EDI in 2011, demand was higher for babies. They received babies 6 months old, but in 2012, went on to enroll older children because, she said, “the EDI is an area for child development, but is working as a childcare center” (*Gomes, 2013*). By examining these statements, some values stand out: “crèches are for working mothers”, “mothers want to get rid of their children”, “a young child development center is not a crèche” and “the EDI needs more places for pre-school”, i.e., for older children.

The criticism of mothers who do not work and “lie around doing nothing” or “want to get rid of their children” is also heard from some of the parents and guardians interviewed: one mother asked: “Working mothers have priority? The director replied: “Unfortunately, no” (*Gomes, 2013*).

There is an overlap of issues underlying these texts that sheds light on the logic that the creche is a tool to be used by the households. It is an almost deterministic relationship: if you don’t work, then you don’t need it and you are not entitled to it, you are an irresponsible mother who does not want anything to do with your children. On the other hand, if she works, her situation as wife/mother fighting for survival of her children is recognized, and therefore, the right to the creche is legitimate. In these statements, more than anything else, it is clear that the crèche is not considered as the child’s right. In the course of the study, when the children asked where their mothers were, during the process of adaptation, the professionals responded that they were working. The children then repeated: “Where’s Mummy? Gone work”. Thus, it is justifiable to leave them in the crèche, and that is

³Research on registration forms was carried out in March 2012.

how the adults tried to comfort them. This question touches on the social function of the school and the creche as a right of the child.

As regards prioritizing the pre-school, if the demand contingency is for babies and the EDI that was observed may be considered representative of the overall network, is it the case that their strategy is to prepare children for pre-school? When considering the percentage of children of 31 months or more in the regular network (28.2%) and those enrolled in the PIC (4.8%), it is important to consider that possibility. Moreover, specifically in the EDI researched, the administration does not favor the entry of babies, and this fact raises the issue of the influence of the administration on the public policies that are established. The affirmation of the director that “the Early Child Development Center is not a crèche” leads to the inference that, for her, caring for babies is not linked to educational aspects, since in her view, they just need maternal care. There are vestiges here of an assistentialist welfare frame of mind, in which access to education is justified only if the “mother” works; otherwise, the child and family would not have this right.

Taking another approach, collating comments from the families, both at the time of entry of young children, as well as in the collective interviews, either in the PIC or the EDI, very positive expectations are heard regarding the creche. The reasons why the parents seek the help of the institutions for their children are varied:

“(…) The development of my child.”

“(…) Here there’s play, the activities help build motor skills, now she can now pick things up and do a drawing.”

“(…) It helps him to develop confidence.”

(Gomes, 2013)

The person responsible for a girl 3 commented:

“My daughter pays attention to what the teacher asks. The other day, she asked for the newspaper, to take it to the creche because the teacher was working with names.”

(Gomes, 2013)

This view also appears at a meeting of the PIC, when the Deputy Director asked about the expectation of those responsible for signing up the children for the program: “my son is shy, everything is new. I want him to have fun, to grow and enjoy the company of other children” (Gomes, 2013).

In these statements, there is a clear understanding that the creche is a place to acquire culture and is an investment in the overall development of the child. It is also an opportunity for the mother to increase her level of schooling or to go to work. In that respect, in some statements, it is also clear that it is painful for those responsible to be parted from their children:

“...if I wasn’t working, I’d stay”. She almost runs out with a faint-hearted smile (Gomes, 2013). A father leaves his daughter who starts to cry. He gives some information to the helper and says to his daughter: “Daddy’s just down here”. When the door closes, he gives a wave and says to me: “you have to, don’t you?” (Gomes, 2013).

Another view expressed in both the EDI and the PIC, relates to the trust people have in the teams:

“I used to pay someone to take care of my son. I used to buy food and saw he was always thin. In the creche, he’s well. When he gets home, I know he’s being treated well” (Gomes, 2013).

At the EDI they said that, even if they weren’t working, they would let the children join—they value the work being done: “even if I didn’t work I would still enroll my son” (Gomes, 2013).

The mother of a child 1 year and 4 months old, newly enrolled, comments:

“No matter how much you are worrying, with your heart breaking, you talk with the Director and with the teacher. Your son is in a safe place. Now, I’m more relaxed” (Gomes, 2013).

The trust shown by parents is an attribute that touches on issues associated with the subjective constitution of the subject and bears a series of characteristics, involving interpersonal interactions and the directing of these relationships along paths that may trigger or not cognitive, affective and social changes.

Tedesco (2004) offers interesting contributions, referring to a new model for educational policy associated with equal opportunities, defending the idea that one should take into account the development of a “policy of subjectivity” in the actions aiming to correct social inequalities. Although referring directly to those doing the educating, is it possible to make a connection with the issues being dealt with here. Among the strategies of this educational policy, one of the elements to be taken into account is trust. At a personal level, the construction of the representation of self and of others is slow and steady. In this process of construction, when the representations are tinged by social stigmas, they are durable and hard to change (Tedesco, 2004: p. 571). In this sense, in

contrast to the trust given by the parents and guardians to the team working in the EDI, it is possible to identify, in the attitudes of administrators and teachers, the expressions that touch on this point. Bearing in mind Tedesco's comments, we describe here a few more events:

The helpers at the creche start talking: "Children develop a lot in the crèche". Another responds: "Yes, they are like little animals, they wanted to fight with us. Now they are completely different" (Gomes, 2013).

While observing at the EDI, at a meeting of parents, I heard the following comment from a mother:

She has two children of 11 and 13 who take care of their little sister. They pick her up from the crèche, they stay with her while Mummy works. Next year the little one will start school and she won't know what to do if the older children do not go to school at the same time as her. She had a girl who used to take care of the child, but she can't now because of a health problem. Her mother has hemodialysis and so she can't do it anymore. Her sister also works and has a young daughter. She says:

"Today my 13 year old daughter is taking care of her sister and little cousin. I didn't want to transfer that responsibility, which is what happened to me, but there's no way. She doesn't have time to play".

This mother told us that when she got older, she was responsible for the sister. "I had only 15 minutes to get my sister to school and if I was late, the Director used to say that I had been playing around and that he'd talk to my mother." Except that she couldn't get the bus and had to walk. "I didn't have the right to play and it's happening all over again with my children" (Gomes, 2013).

In these texts there are mismatches in the expectations expressed by parents, administrators, teachers and crèche helpers that make up the basis for their relations, and for the daily actions of the institutions, which affect directly the babies and toddlers.

4. Rational for the Formulation of a Policy on Early Childhood Education

There is a lot to be discovered about the relationship between families and schools regarding the use of educational institutions for young children and even in web of interactions in order to create effective joint responsibility for the whole development of the child.

Based on our analysis of what is said by families both in collective interviews and from observations, some relevant aspects become clear:

1) Those responsible for the children consider the crèche to be the child's first opportunity of access to interaction with their peers, and entrust to the teams in the crèches the responsibility for the development of their children. Many commented that at home their children had no interaction with other children.

2) Access to the creche gives the family the opportunity to achieve social rights and widen their cultural repertoire. According to some parents, the children bring educational and cultural demands which involve parents and guardians and raise questions concerning acquisition of knowledge. Another issue is the fact that the parents and guardians have the opportunity to resume schooling or join the job market.

Paradoxically, the EDI administrators do not value the recognition by families of the creche's role as a propagator of rights. In contrast to this approach, the administrators of the crèche at the PIC, though aware that families served in this program did not effectively belong to that institution, since the children were not enrolled in regular hours, recognized the level of appreciation and recognition of the service.

Given these findings, it is important to reaffirm that at the macro-political level, government strategies such as the PIC do not actually solve the real needs of the population for a number of reasons: 1) the program uses mechanisms for expansion of the service in a "virtual" perspective, with precarious use of public services, since the children are included in the numbers of children in the regular teaching network, however they only benefit from the service on Saturdays; 2) the percentage of children who are enrolled in the regular education network is not compatible with the age group enrolled in the PIC.

During the fieldwork it was observed that in many situations the school assumed attitudes that reinforced inequality and, in others, there was the possibility of producing new ways to deliver quality services to the population.

At the micro-political level, the administration takes on a role of social relevance, because it can reinforce this exclusion or minimize it. An example of this discussion would be the orientation process and completion of the registration for the "lottery" for access to registration for the regular schedule. Whereas during meetings at the PIC, the administrators explained the process repeatedly, provided information material and official documents proving that families participated in the program, at the time of registration at the EDI, none of this was taken into account.

In relation to speeches made by administrators and employees at the EDI, it was clear that the families were seen as agents to be used to favor maintaining the bureaucratic-administrative machine of the institution. In other words, with all the activities, whether at the time of admission of children, whether in the organization of monthly meetings with the families or festive events, what was observed was the carrying out of those activities required by the Municipal Secretariat of Education as the only possibility of operation without criticism, in an automated way, in order to comply with targets and tasks. That attitude was also noted in the meetings of the PIC, when coordinated by teachers, and social workers and nurses who were representatives of the Social Welfare Coordination and Family Health Programs respectively.

It is worth looking at the model of the “*conversation wheel*” used at the PIC as presented in the official document issued by the Secretariat of Education and how this was applied. With the exception of the administrator who, when coordinating the meeting maintained a stream of rich and participatory dialogue, it was observed that those responsible for leading these meetings used the information videos included in the project without contextualizing the reality of families, for whom this information was intended. Thus, just as in the EDI, the meetings became informational, “utilitarian”, monologues, with the aim of meeting public service targets.

The EDI could be oriented to prioritize the pre-school in order to prepare children for entry into Basic Education, given the admission of 28.2% children from 31 months on or more, as well as the attitudes of the administrators. This raises the question-if this is doable, would it be a channel to reproduce policies that are based on the preparation of citizens for the workplace? And if that is the intention, how is the policy of service for minors to be designed? Will babies and toddlers still have no place in Early Childhood Education?

The process of offering early childhood education institutions, and the way it is carried out, covers a series of challenges that need to be researched more deeply. The transition between the home and creche and dealing with the peculiarities of this process are meaningful discussions which are far from being exhausted by this piece of work. However, it is interesting to look at the meaning of “reception and welcome”, the term used officially in the municipal education network of Rio de Janeiro, and contrast it with what was observed, i.e. “adaptation and adjustment” in the sense of framing the child within a systematized, mechanical routine, distant from the forms of expressive modes that ludic activities bring and which the process of “adaptation and adjustment” eschews.

According to Souza (2007), Bakhtin states that: “words are woven from a multitude of ideological strands and are the web that underlies social relations in all domains” (p. 162). This proposition is interesting when we reflect on the word “reception and welcome”, in the context in which it has been used. Although this word has been officially put forward as a pedagogical proposal at the time of admission of children into creches, being included in the calendar of the school year and discussed through a note addressed to the teachers accompanying the children, there has been no indication of the team’s preparation treatment to give wider meaning to the intention of the word, in other words, the concept of “adaptation and adjustment” is still prevalent. The families are not invited to participate effectively in this process and children are assumed to have “adapted” when they stop crying, no longer ask for a cuddle or join in with the institutional routine.

Thus we can see the reception/induction process as a problem, because it should not be about framing child behavior within a system pre-determined by the institution, but should rather involve actions that relate to the Political-Pedagogical Project, the way the school sees children and establishing relationship with families and the community. In short it should be based on the importance of the socio-cultural and political role that the Early Childhood institution has for society.

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