

The space of the baby library in early childhood education as perceived by educators¹

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates experiences associated with reading in nursery school spaces, based on listening to nursery attendants and teachers, in order to reflect on the baby library. The method is characterized by an exploratory approach based on empirical research, and the data was gathered through focus groups and interviews. The category investigated is environments that house books and other materials dedicated to children. The interlocutors' understanding of the baby library, as well as their conceptions of this environment, are discussed in this article. The reflection points to the baby library as a viable space for babies and very young children and for literary reading to be present at this level of education. This highlights the importance of having an appropriate environment for babies and very young children in these schools, both for storing and making materials available, in order to provide reading experiences.

KEYWORDS: Baby library; Literary reading; Early childhood education.

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O espaço da bebeteca na educação infantil pela percepção de educadoras

RESUMO

O artigo investiga experiências associadas à leitura em espaços escolares destinados à etapa creche, com base na escuta de atendentes e de professoras, para refletir acerca da bebeteca. O método caracteriza-se pela abordagem exploratória alicerçada em pesquisa empírica, e a construção dos dados faz-se por meio de grupos focais e de entrevista. Ambiências que acolhem livros e outros materiais dedicados aos pequenos é a categoria investigada. O entendimento das interlocutoras sobre a bebeteca, assim como suas concepções acerca deste ambiente são discutidos neste artigo. A reflexão aponta a bebeteca como espaço viável a bebês e crianças bem pequenas e para que a leitura literária esteja presente nesse nível de ensino. Assim, destaca-se a relevância da presença, nesses educandários, de um ambiente apropriado para os bebês e as crianças bem pequenas, tanto para armazenar como para disponibilizar materiais, de modo a oportunizar experiências de leitura.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Bebeteca; Leitura literária; Educação infantil.

El espacio de la bebeteca en la educación infantil desde la perspectiva de los educadores

RESUMEN

El artículo indaga en experiencias asociadas a la lectura en espacios escolares destinados a la etapa guardería, a partir de la escucha de acompañantes y docentes, para reflexionar sobre el espacio de biblioteca para niños. El método se caracteriza por un enfoque exploratorio basado en la investigación empírica, y la construcción de datos se realiza a través de grupos focales y entrevistas. Los ambientes que albergan libros y otros materiales dedicados a los niños son la categoría investigada. En este artículo se analiza la comprensión que tienen los interlocutores de la bebeteca, así como sus concepciones sobre este entorno. La reflexión apunta a la biblioteca infantil como un espacio viable para que los bebés y niños muy pequeños y la lectura literaria estén presentes en este nivel educativo. De esta forma, se destaca la importancia de contar en estos centros educativos con un ambiente adecuado para los bebés y niños muy pequeños,

tanto para almacenar como para poner a disposición materiales, con el fin de proporcionar experiencias de lectura.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Biblioteca infantil; Lectura literária; Educación Infantil Temprana.

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[...] Ever since I was very little, books have given me food and shelter. This is how it was: I played as a builder, books were the bricks; upright, they became walls; lying down, they became steps; leaning over, one against the other, they became a roof. And when the little house was finished, I squeezed myself inside to play living in a book. From house to house, I discovered the world (by staring at the walls so much). First, by looking at drawings; then by deciphering words. I grew up; and I tore down roofs with my head.
Lygia Bojunga

Introduction

What are the spaces like in early childhood education schools in Brazil, designed for babies and children? Are there opportunities for children to build havens of imagination and books? The answer to this question is diverse. We understand that being in an environment suited to children's needs can help them establish relationships with themselves and the world. By researching literary reading at different stages of life, this article focuses on designing a place that welcomes children through reading, drawing on the insights of professionals working in Early Childhood Education. It is emphasized that "reading" literature is the foundation for humanization, and when it comes to babies, they read using all their senses:

[...] they read their mother's face to know if they are loved or if she is sad, they read her scent, their father's voice, the movement of the trees, the functioning of their toys. Through the power of reading, [...] children enter the universe of meaning and begin to think and interact (Baptista; López; Júnior, 2016, p. 111-112).

Reading, we emphasize, requires a loving bond between mature and novice readers, language games, and playfulness. Children's playful interaction with reading fosters their development, and all spaces in a childcare institution are places to promote reading. However, the existence of specific environments for this practice can promote it systematically.

In a study on cultural mediation and humanization, Kupiec, Neitzel, and Carvalho (2014) address the mediating spaces of art, and here, we address the baby library with literary works. And why was literature in Early Childhood Education in the baby library chosen? We understand that literary language contributes to humanization, as it can make us more understanding of ourselves and others and, thus, open to society (Ramos, 2015, p. 23). The relationships we forge with literature lead to discoveries about the world, because:

[...] the theme of Literature is the human being and their life, their relationships with the Other, their conflicts, their uncertainties, their fears. At all times in life, we live with doubts, and in childhood, due to the intense process of adaptation that the child undergoes to adjust to the social environment in which they live, the interaction with fictional characters' conflicts is even more significant (Ramos, 2010, p. 21).

If the subject of literature is human nature—our concerns, our contradictions—we have the right to draw from this source from an early age. Indeed, literary texts also make an impression on early childhood, "when there is a connection between: (a) the way of speaking (the structure of the text); (b) the theme conveyed; and (c) the concerns of the reader or listener." (Ramos, 2015, p. 23). Like us, Petit (2024) is interested in the bonds we forge, in the way our inner world is composed and recomposed when we encounter a text, whether oral or written. And this text can be just a sentence. We are, therefore, as the anthropologist argues, perhaps above all, poetic animals.

Thus, spaces organized for the poetic experience of literary reading by babies and very young children set the quality of educational services offered in Early

Childhood Education. This is because the space promotes children's experiences and appropriations, capable of expanding the possibilities for learning and development (Maciel, Ramos, Galardini, 2021).

When we talk about reading spaces, we immediately think of libraries. However, studies on libraries in early childhood education are still scarce, perhaps because these spaces are also restricted. Children aged 0 to 3 years and 11 months old cannot be excluded from the library space, as it could provide access to emotions important to babies and very young children.

These issues will be addressed in more detail later in this article, generated from the voices of interlocutors (teachers and assistants) who work at an Early Childhood Education school.

Theoretical foundation

Traditional libraries are not suitable for early childhood children; therefore, creating a space appropriate for early childhood education users is essential. A baby library is a space dedicated to early childhood books, where a variety of activities can be carried out. The term itself consists of a

special care service for young children (from zero to six years old) that includes, in addition to a space and a collection of books chosen to meet the needs of younger children and their parents [...] (Escardó, 1999, p. 10).

The author adds that this environment also offers loans and periodic conversations about literature and its functions.

Hasper and Neitzel (2020) conceptualize it as a reading environment “[...] that prioritizes children’s autonomy and that, in its organization, awakens the same feeling of joy, [...], that encourages the child to want to be there, nourishing the senses through the aesthetic experience.” (2020, p. 74). It is a space that allows young children to interact and connect with the stories available, as Hasper and

Neitzel assert. There, they can have experiences with affection, fostering imagination and creativity, with the voice being just one of the resources used.

The needs of its users guide the organization of a baby library, and its space “[...] is more dynamic and lively than that of a traditional library and the books are playful and interactive, different from the books used by adults or pre-teens. (...)” (Souza; Motoyama, 2014, p. 26). This environment fosters a loving relationship between children and books, as these and other items in the environment can provide bonds through observing, listening, and sharing emotions. It also allows educators and the children’s families to connect with literature.

The activities of the baby library, according to Reyes (2008), favor actions with “books without pages”, that is, activities that are based on oral tradition (popular songs, physical games, nursery rhymes, etc.). In this environment, we hope to find living books (Ramos, 2010), that is, people who narrate, who position themselves as books. However, the space should also contain a collection for adults with short poems and stories, songs and nursery rhymes, as well as sound documents and puppets to use in activities with babies, and even works that guide their role as reading mediators. Under the premise that it is designed and architecturally planned for specific users, the baby library invites you to educate the senses through the possibilities offered, being a reading environment that values joy and, at the same time, the autonomy of children.

Based on the above, a baby library is an environment that allows children to explore reading from a very early age and also offers other resources and intents. It is a place of affection and playfulness that aims for the integral development of children. These assumptions lead us to reflect on how teachers and staff understand this space in the early childhood education school where they work.

Methodology

Anchored in a case study, this qualitative research focused on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. The phenomenon is reading practices in early childhood education settings in the city of Nova Prata, Rio

Grande do Sul (Marchesini, 2021). The case was analyzed based on evidence sources, semi-structured interviews with teachers and a focus group with nursery workers⁵. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee, in accordance with consolidated Opinion number 4.395.245. The primary objective of the research was to investigate educational processes associated with reading, using the Early Childhood Education – preschool stage – as a setting in the city of Nova Prata/RS. Based on this research, reading from the perspective of educators has already been presented (RAMOS, MARCHESINI, MACIEL, 2023). This article dealt with the concept of the baby library, based on the material constructed and stated in the dissertation, being retextualized here.

The school's physical area covers 1,211.00 m², divided into five blocks: administrative, service, pedagogical, multipurpose, and outdoor areas. The pedagogical area includes nursery and preschool classrooms. In 2021, it welcomed 9 classes - around 170 children - who attended regularly: 2 nursery I classes, 2 nursery II classes, 2 preschool I classes, and 3 preschool II classes.

The research subjects - 6 teachers and 13 Early Childhood Education assistants - are all female. The educators collaborated with the research through interviews and focus groups. Throughout the discussions, their identities are protected, and we named each of them using the letters T (teachers) and A (assistants), followed by a number in ascending order for each collaborator. Here, the interlocutors' positions regarding the baby library are contemplated.

Results and discussion

The following discussion brings together the interlocutors' voices and theoretical assumptions. The educators were asked and challenged to imagine and describe what the ideal reading space would look like, based on their own conceptions. It is worth noting that the school where the research is conducted

⁵ Nursery workers are professionals who assist teachers in municipal early childhood education schools. For this position, candidates must pass a public exam.

has ample space, with essential spaces for babies and very young children. However, it does not have a baby library or a dedicated space for babies and children to interact with books.

Reading time at the school is provided in the reference rooms or other settings, such as the school playground, the school lawn, or the library. The school's library (Fig. 1) is for the use of educators and is not intended for children. It features closed cabinets, and most books are displayed at a height accessible only to adults.

FIGURE 1: School library collection.



Source: Researchers' archive (2021).

The image highlights that the library does not meet children's needs. One of the points of discussion about the idealization of a reading environment mentioned by the interviewees was that it should be inviting to children. They considered visualization important, as evidenced during the focus group and interviews in the following statements:

P2 – Visually well-designed, to catch the child's attention. An environment that invites curiosity.

P5 – I think I would put together a very colorful space.

A9 – Decorated, to catch their attention so they feel comfortable in that place.

A1 – A colorful, cozy environment, right? Where the child feels good and comfortable, right?

The professionals suggest a colorful and cozy environment, creating a decor that is eye-catching for children, without forgetting the charm. This ambiance is created through drawings of literary characters or images reminiscent of childhood, such as reproduced toys. The visual aspect of the baby library is an important factor, according to empirical evidence. Young children are observant and can feel drawn to the space. In this sense, Perrotti (2015) argues that:

It is not about "decorating," making it "pretty," or "graceful." Aesthetic care is intertwined with other, more significant dimensions of life, such as forming bonds, the individual's relationship with the environment, and the mobilization of emotions and feelings. (Perrotti, 2015, p. 134)

We emphasize that the setting should not impose a standard image, such as figures of princesses or other heroes taken from movies. Cinderella can be represented in various ways, incorporating elements of local culture. From this perspective, because the baby library helps child development, it requires adequate physical space for its operation. The child's unique characteristics and playfulness integrate this scenario, so the space must welcome the user.

The tones of the environment are conceived by Silva (2009), who recommends walls with different colors than those that make up the reference rooms, with light and cheerful shades, but without visual pollution; as for the decor, it should be pleasant, as the reading environment is dynamic, not just a place to store books and other resources.

Perrotti (2015) suggests that the space meet the needs of children, observing requirements such as adequate lighting, ventilation, and acoustics. The environment requires brightness, windows to ensure air circulation, and acoustics

that prevent external noise from entering and generating echoes in the speech of visitors. In Early Childhood Education institutions, we assume that, “[...] if the space is too small, poorly lit and unwelcoming, it will probably result in apathy, aggression, nervousness and a feeling of discomfort in children” (Bassedas; Huguet; Solé, 1999, p. 106). The goal is to delight children from the moment they enter the room, with an inviting and cheerful physical space, as opposed to dark environments, which restrict the child's movement and will not form bonds and provide welcoming experiences.

The physical space, in short, meets the specific needs of children, observing the suitability of objects to the location, as well as “[...] the purposes for which they are intended, the individuals who will use them, the harmonization of the whole” (Perrotti, Pieruccini and Carnelosso, 2016, p. 21). Therefore, caution must also be taken with steps, so that children have direct access, without elevations, to avoid falls.

Moving on to the units that make up the physical space, when asked what items would be placed there to constitute and make the environment complete, they suggest the presence of comfortable items:

P6 – Well, first I would put a rug on the floor, some pillows.

P3 – Well, it would be a room with pillows [...]

P1 – [...] a rug would be important for them to sit on, some pillows, some things that make them feel comfortable, you know.

P2 – A cozy rug, pillows.

P5 – I would do it with poufs or pillows so the child could sit and be very cozy.

A12 – Oh, I would put pillows for them to sit on the floor.

A4 – Rugs, pillows, tatami mats.

The participants advocate for comfort for the protagonists and those who accompany them. The act of reading requires comfort, as Escardó i Bás explains: “[...] it must be pleasant, comfortable, both for children and the

adults who accompany them, they must be able to hold them in their laps, hug them while they tell stories [...]” (1999, p. 9, self-translated). To ensure comfort, the furniture must be adjusted to suit both the children and the adults who will be participating in the space.

Regarding the cultural object book, which is also essential to the baby library, it will make sense to children if it is within their reach. With a sparkle in her eyes and a smile on her face, P4 envisions the space:

P4 - We could make a little library for them, you know, with books that could be just for them, regardless of whether they might get damaged or anything. It could have pillows, make-believe things that could trigger their imagination, you know. I think leaving the reference room and going to a different place also gives them that feeling of: "Ahh, it's different," that curiosity, look, we're going to that other room, you know.

The participant envisions the reading space and affectionately refers to it as a "little library." According to P4, in this place, subjects would encounter the imaginary, make-believe, joy, and wonder. This concept suggests that a cozy physical environment would provide users with free access to materials and comfort while reading, as well as the opportunity to find books in places where they can touch and make choices, accompanied by furniture suitable for the child's size and needs.

When the participant mentions “books that could be just for them”, we refer to the assumption that babies and very young children “[...] swing, hit, manipulate, taste everything they find in front of them” (Baptista; López; Júnior, 2016, p. 112). Therefore, promoting the handling of books and other materials present in the reading environment tends to favor the individual's reading development.

Regarding access to books, P6 goes further by describing the ideal place for reading and speaking practices, gesturing with arms and hands: “I imagine it like a tree, you know, with books hanging from above, but at the same time the books are low enough for them to handle, and books are spread out, very free. [...]”.

Therefore, we note that the idealized environment is targeted at young readers, the protagonists of the process. Whether through scattered books or hanging books, user access to the object is a priority. Facchini (2009) explains:

Books should be within reach of children who are still crawling, so they can choose and pick them up. They can be classified by their theme, their interaction requirements, the material used, and even possibility, regardless of handling. (Facchini, 2009, p. 15).

From an early age, we encourage children to touch and handle books since they are little, to foster confidence during the process and in future choices, regardless of age. Book handling is a learned skill.

The furniture in the reading room is valuable. Teachers and assistants were asked to describe the elements that would make up this space:

P3 – I would have a chest, a box, somewhere they can freely explore the little books. Thinking about visual contact and manipulating the book, it would be so that the children would have that contact of handling, leafing through this material. [...] It could also be puppets, there could also be costumes.

P2 – There will be a little rack, a bookshelf, [...]. Shelves at the children's height, furniture at the children's height, so they can open, move, and explore the books. They would be free, this reading room would be a free time for them to explore.

A2 – [...] there would be plenty of space for them to sit and explore the books, freely. We could even tell the story, but let them feel free.

When idealizing a baby library, the collection is organized so that children can choose the book independently, which will make the moment more enjoyable. Baptista, López and Júnior (2016) state: “[...] the presence of low racks and shelves

is a condition for child readers to have free access to the volumes, being able to choose the book they like most [...]” (p. 110).

Facchini (2009) also advises that it is necessary to consider the strength capacity of babies when stating:

[...] the furniture must be strong enough to withstand their energy and light enough so that, in the event of accidents, they will not be seriously injured. All materials made available to children must meet the safety requirements (p. 15).

In view of this, the safety of the environment needs to be observed due to the fact that babies and very young children do not yet understand the risks that some actions can entail. Therefore, it is recommended that furniture have rounded corners or that it be fitted with a material that does not cause injuries, such as silicone or rubber corners.

As the baby library is a space dedicated to child development, early childhood would be left free to explore the materials provided, having access to different sensations, as explained by Souza and Motoyama (2016):

[...] the baby library must be multifunctional and, in addition to offering the most varied types of books, have spaces for other activities in which children come into contact with literature with different sensory stimuli, such as storytelling, handling puppets, tapestries that tell stories, reading aloud, among other practices [...] (p. 29).

Items that stimulate children's imagination and creativity are welcome, as reported by the educators:

P1 – I would make something within their reach, a piece of furniture within their reach. I would make a design like a tree with branches and things that have books on display.

And I wouldn't just put books, I would put other objects in there, you know: stuffed animals or other things that they can create stories with, so it's not just having books, but also creating.

A10 – I think it would also be interesting for us to create a place to make puppets, [...].

P5 – [...] And then, I think I would make the furniture low, at their height, so they could enter, like, if it were a free day, for example, each one could enter and could choose their puppet or their little book. [...] Books, and I think also puppets.

When pointing out items to make up the reading environment, the interlocutors do not only mention books, but also other elements that refer to stories and imagination, which are also welcome in the baby library. In view of this, Souza and Motoyama (2014) defend the playful space that promotes creativity. In the words of the authors, concerning playfulness,

[...] books can be displayed in different ways, such as in baskets, chests, in corners decorated according to the textual genre or the theme of the book, they can be arranged with puppets and in unusual places such as rugs with cushions and other forms of organization that are welcoming and that allow mobility, choice and comfort to those who seek to read. (Souza; Motoyama, 2016, p. 163).

The way users are welcomed into the reading space prioritizes the protagonist in handling and discovering/recognizing the materials present there. The various items that will be part of the environment, whether books, puppets, pillows, or chests, aim to welcome the young reader while also enabling mobility and autonomy. The environment, we emphasize, is not intended to teach literacy or make children decode words faster. It is not about using the book as a tool to teach something, but about helping babies and children experience reading as a pleasurable gesture, through playful ways.

In line with the descriptions, the idealized environment evokes a lively, playful, well-lit place with resources at its disposal. The characterization of the baby library as a meeting place and a place to promote reading, whether through the mediation of an adult or the handling of storybooks, is seen as an opportunity, aiming at the need to recognize reading for young children as a learning activity that contributes to their integral development.

In addition to the child, the protagonist of the environment, we take into consideration their companions, who provide embraces and hugs while stories are told or read. That said, the baby library is “[...] a space of peace, where emotional bonds are found through stories, and where reading is looking, listening, sharing” (Escardo I Bas, 1999, p. 10).

Since children are in the process of acquiring language in their early years of life and do not have access to written language, these individuals may have contact with different sensory stimuli, such as storytelling resources provided by the mediator, among other plots.

Final considerations

Babies and very young children, in addition to having the right to quality books, need, we reiterate, an appropriate environment to experience reading through the senses, as well as adults sensitive to the demands of users and literature, to create conditions for the encounter, that is, literary reading, to take place from nursery school onwards.

The baby library is suitable for both storing and displaying books and other materials related to the reading experience. It requires attention to safety, mobility, acoustics, thermal comfort, light, and ventilation. Therefore, installing lights that allow good visibility and opening windows are essential so that the child does not develop apathy towards the environment, but is instead attracted to the space. On the floor, rugs and mats so that babies can crawl and children can sit to experience reading and/or listening to stories are items considered. As for cushions,

it is suggested to look at, in addition to the color, the fabric and, also, the absence of elements such as buttons, which can be ripped off and cause accidents.

The school's book collection includes works for young children, but all can be handled by adults. Knowing that the baby library's visitors will include babies who are not yet walking, young children, and adults, the collection should be varied—paper books; bath books; cloth books; foam books; cardboard books; and toys. Because babies bite, lick, and handle books in their own way, some books can be damaged. So, the nursery is organized to replenish the collection. Books wear out and get damaged through use! Babies' favorites are likely to be the ones bitten the most.

Thinking about an environment designed for reading, in baby libraries, therefore implies valuing the book as a cultural object that teaches through playfulness, through which the child explores the game of symbolic constructions that provide opportunities for their integral, sensitive, and intelligible development. As for furniture, low shelves and racks are recommended so that children can make their own choices. For babies, sturdy wooden boxes lined with foam are preferable, as sharp corners can hurt them. This way, books would be available to children, doing justice to their space. Other objects that refer to fiction can be part of the baby library, such as puppets, and such materials would be gathered and stored on shelves or chests, making them available to users.

As adults accompany the children and can learn cultural mediation, the space can contain items for parents and teachers to handle. Qualified professionals with regard to the nature of the collection and the needs of children are the goal of a school, of a baby library. Educators who understand the nature of artistic text are, therefore, the professionals expected in these spaces, so that art is not didacticized. Literature, we remember, is symbolic and opens doors, builds bridges for everyone, including babies and young children.

Through the intersection of theoretical and empirical interlocutors, we understand that the baby library would be a space that promotes friendly reading for babies and very young children. The benefits arising from it broaden horizons

within the Early Childhood Education institution by reaching the child's cognitive and affective aspects. For it to be implemented in a nursery school, there is a need for investment from the maintainer, whether in preparing the space, the professionals who will work there, as well as in replenishing the collection. Our interlocutors, we recall, demonstrated a desire to promote reading in an environment planned and organized for such action.

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