

Teaching in Early Childhood Education: ambiguities, contradictions, and suspicions¹

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ABSTRACT

The text analyzes teaching in Early Childhood Education from a critical perspective, highlighting its ambiguities, contradictions, and historical challenges. It is based on the understanding that teaching young children cannot be reduced to assistentialist or spontaneous practices but must be recognized as an intentional pedagogical action of an intellectual and political nature. The essay revisits the historical trajectory of Early Childhood Education in Brazil, emphasizing its origins marked by care, social control, and unequal access, which still resonate in contemporary practices. In discussing conceptions of childhood, the text problematizes naturalized views and reaffirms the child as a subject of rights, embedded in complex social, cultural, and ecological contexts. In the field of teacher education, it emphasizes the need to overcome the dichotomy between theory and practice, defending praxis as a fundamental dialectical unity for critical teaching practice. It also analyzes the processes of devaluation of teaching in Early Childhood Education, associated with the feminization of the profession and the myth of the “natural educator,” which obscure its professional and intellectual character. Finally, the text advocates for the construction of grounded and critical

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pedagogical practices committed to children's integral development, recognizing teaching as a space for knowledge production, cultural mediation, and social transformation.

KEYWORDS: Early Childhood Education. Teaching. Teacher Education. Childhood.

A Docência na Educação Infantil: ambiguidades, contradições, suspeitas

RESUMO

O texto analisa a docência na Educação Infantil a partir de uma perspectiva crítica, evidenciando suas ambiguidades, contradições e desafios históricos. Parte da compreensão de que o trabalho docente com crianças pequenas não pode ser reduzido a práticas assistencialistas ou espontaneístas, mas deve ser reconhecido como ação pedagógica intencional, de caráter intelectual e político. O ensaio acadêmico retoma o percurso histórico da Educação Infantil no Brasil, destacando sua origem marcada por funções de cuidado, controle social e desigualdades de acesso, que ainda reverberam nas práticas contemporâneas. Ao discutir as concepções de infância, o texto problematiza visões naturalizantes e reafirma a criança como sujeito de direitos, inserida em contextos sociais, culturais complexos. No campo da formação docente, o artigo evidencia a necessidade de superar a dicotomia entre teoria e prática, defendendo a práxis como unidade dialética fundamental para a atuação crítica dos professores. Também são analisados os processos de desvalorização da docência na Educação Infantil, associados à feminização da profissão e ao mito da educadora nata, que obscurecem seu caráter profissional e intelectual. Por fim, o texto defende a construção de práticas pedagógicas fundamentadas, críticas e comprometidas com o desenvolvimento das crianças, reconhecendo a docência como espaço de produção de conhecimento, mediação cultural e transformação social.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Educação Infantil. Docência. Formação de Professores. Infância.

La Docencia en la Educación Infantil: ambigüedades, contradicciones y sospechas

RESUMEN

El texto analiza la docencia en la Educación Infantil desde una perspectiva crítica, evidenciando sus ambigüedades, contradicciones y desafíos históricos. Parte de la comprensión de que el trabajo docente con niños pequeños no puede reducirse a prácticas asistencialistas o espontaneístas, sino que debe ser reconocido como una acción pedagógica intencional, de carácter intelectual y político. El ensayo académico retoma el recorrido histórico de la Educación Infantil en Brasil, destacando su origen marcado por funciones de cuidado, control social y desigualdades de acceso, que aún repercuten en las prácticas contemporáneas. Al discutir las concepciones de infancia, el texto problematiza visiones naturalizantes y reafirma al niño como sujeto de derechos, inserto en contextos sociales y culturales complejos. En el campo de la formación docente, el artículo evidencia la necesidad de superar la dicotomía entre teoría y práctica, defendiendo la praxis como unidad dialéctica fundamental para la actuación crítica de los profesores. También se analizan los procesos de desvalorización de la docencia en la Educación Infantil, asociados a la feminización de la profesión y al mito de la educadora nata, que oscurecen su carácter profesional e intelectual. Finalmente, el texto defiende la construcción de prácticas pedagógicas fundamentadas, críticas y comprometidas con el desarrollo de los niños, reconociendo la docencia como un espacio de producción de conocimiento, mediación cultural y transformación social.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación Infantil. Docencia. Formación de Profesores. Infancia.

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Diego não conhecia o mar. O pai, Santiago Kovakloff, levou-o para que descobrisse o mar. Viajaram para o Sul. Ele, o mar, estava do outro lado das dunas altas, esperando. Quando o menino e o pai enfim alcançaram aquelas alturas de areia, depois de muito caminhar, o mar estava na frente de seus olhos. E foi tanta a imensidão do mar, e tanto seu fulgor, que o menino ficou mudo de beleza. E quando finalmente conseguiu falar, tremendo, gaguejando, pediu ao pai: - Me ajuda a olhar!

Eduardo Galeano (2002)

Introduction

Reflecting on the conceptions that underpin the role of Early Childhood Education in children's development is an exercise in displacement and openness. Eduardo Galeano's poetry offers a powerful metaphor for this movement: the narrative of a child asking his father for help to look at the sea. Faced with such immensity, the child turns to the mediation of someone more experienced, not to replace his vision, but to broaden it, helping him make sense of what he sees and feels.

Similarly, the Early Childhood Education school constitutes a space in which young children need the gaze, listening, and intentional action of their teachers. The educational process cannot be restricted to what children are already capable of doing autonomously; it is necessary to provide conditions that enable them to move forward, observe the world, and appropriate new forms of learning. In this process, the teacher's role is not secondary: it is constitutive. It is the teacher's responsibility to broaden horizons, provoke new perspectives, and articulate experience and knowledge, sensitivity and critical reflection.

Galeano's poem therefore opens a path for thinking about Early Childhood Education as having the task of providing children with the necessary conditions to observe and question the world, understanding it in its natural, social, and cultural complexity. Teaching, in this context, is a political and formative act, one that cannot be reduced either to mere transmission or to any form of mediation that abdicates its central responsibility: creating bridges

between the child's present experience and the collective heritage of knowledge and values that shape social life, fostering reflection on nature and on the issues that affect humanity's shared future.

This article is organized as a reflective essay. Its objective is to discuss some central premises in the educational field concerning teaching in Early Childhood Education, examining the traps or crossroads that may emerge when certain principles are adopted at the expense of others.

We assume that suspicion is a fertile path for critical thinking. Reflection is constructed through debate, through a willingness to engage in dialogue, and through openness to the crucial issues that permeate contemporary schooling. The question guiding this essay is: what, after all, is the role of the teacher in Early Childhood Education? How can we overcome normalizing, rigid, and traditional methodological approaches without falling into new misconceptions regarding the teaching profession and its professional recognition in the educational and social spheres?

Segue uma tradução em estilo acadêmico:

By adopting suspicion as an analytical principle, we do not refer to distrust as a form of systematic denial or to the rejection of consensuses produced within the field of education. Rather, it constitutes a critical exercise of questioning seemingly established truths, naturalized discourses, and practices that, under the guise of self-evidence, tend to conceal their historical, social, and political determinations. Suspicion enables the problematization of both traditional conceptions and progressive formulations when they begin to operate as unquestionable certainties.

In this sense, to be suspicious means to shift one's gaze in order to understand the contradictions embedded in discourses on childhood, teaching, learning, and teacher education, interrogating their assumptions, limitations, and effects. Rather than offering definitive answers, suspicion represents a continuous movement of critical analysis, indispensable for understanding the complexity of teaching in Early Childhood Education and for preventing educational categories from being interpreted as natural and universal.

In this way, this essay seeks to reflect on the meanings of teaching in Early Childhood Education, recognizing the historical, social, and cultural complexity that permeates it. By problematizing both continuities and changes, we aim to contribute to the debate surrounding the teaching profession, understanding it as a social practice that requires continuous revision, dialogue, and commitment to professional recognition and valorization.

Childhood Education in Brazil: What Paths Have Led Us to the Present?

Thinking about Early Childhood Education in Brazil requires more than listing dates and legislation; it involves revisiting collective memories, understanding social movements, and analyzing the historical tensions that have shaped this field. The purpose here is not to produce an exhaustive chronology, but rather to recover aspects that help us understand the paths that have brought us to the present.

In seeking to understand how educational provision for children became consolidated in Brazil, and how the social and historical context contributed to its configuration, it is necessary to revisit aspects that preceded its implementation in the national context. This reflection does not aim to reconstruct in detail the history of Early Childhood Education, which has already been addressed by specific studies, but rather to highlight certain elements that help problematize its constitution and continuities.

The creation of institutions dedicated to children is a recent phenomenon in history. For centuries, families and communities were responsible, in a spontaneous and diffuse manner, for ensuring children's survival and socialization. It was within this framework that the first institutional settings aimed at childhood emerged, marked by a foundational ambiguity: while they sought to provide protection and care, they were also deeply imbued with functions of social adaptation and discipline.

In the case of Early Childhood Education, this initial characteristic acquired a strong welfare-oriented connotation, linked to measures aimed

at containing poverty and promoting social hygiene. The justification was explicit: to remove children from environments considered unhealthy, where poor sanitation contributed to high infant mortality rates. However, by prioritizing physical protection over intellectual and cultural development, a framework was consolidated that, rather than affirming the child as a subject of rights, reduced children to objects of guardianship and social regulation.

The European context played a significant role in this field and later expanded to other continents. The first spaces dedicated to the care of young children, still at the end of the eighteenth century, bore deep marks of their time: they were institutions of a religious or philanthropic nature, custody rooms, asylum rooms, and orphanages directed mainly toward poor or abandoned children (Kuhlmann Jr., 1998; Stemmer, 2012; Kishimoto, 1988). The prevailing logic was one of assistance and shelter rather than education, which already outlined a conception associating vulnerable childhood with the need for guardianship.

With the consolidation of the industrialization process in the nineteenth century, these spaces began to respond to new social demands. The division of labor and the increasing participation of women in factories created the need for places that could accommodate not only orphans, but also the children of working women. The population served therefore expanded, yet the paradigm did not substantially change: the dominant idea continued to be that of keeping, guarding, and containing children.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, discourse surrounding childhood gained greater prominence, assuming contours of modernity and scientific legitimacy. The growing diffusion of institutions dedicated to children revealed a concern that, although framed within a progressive ideal, also carried marks of social control and adaptation to new urban and industrial rhythms. In this context, the kindergartens conceived by Friedrich Froebel, founded in 1840 in

Germany, became an international reference and began to guide the creation of new Early Childhood Education institutions (Stemmer, 2012).

This model, which expanded throughout Europe, eventually reached Brazil, highlighting the structural ambiguity of the first institutions dedicated to childhood: they emerged as responses to emerging social needs, yet they carried with them a welfare-oriented conception in which the child was viewed more as an object of protection and control than as a subject of rights and learning. The challenge, still present today, is to question to what extent remnants of this origin continue to influence the ways in which Early Childhood Education is conceived and practiced.

Froebelian pedagogy, marked by the appreciation of play, contact with nature, and the idea of cultivating the child as a growing plant, achieved considerable prestige and came to be regarded as a scientific and humanizing alternative to the prevailing welfare-oriented practices. Nevertheless, its dissemination also brought ambiguities, since the myth of the “born educator” and the maternal character attributed to teaching were reinforced as central foundations of its proposal.

In Brazil, in 1875, the creation of the first private kindergarten in Rio de Janeiro, established by the physician Menezes Vieira and his wife, Carlota de Menezes, inserted the country into this international movement (Kuhlmann Jr., 2000). This milestone reveals both the importance of European models and the search for scientific and pedagogical legitimacy for childhood, which until then had remained confined to the domestic sphere or to philanthropic initiatives. Thus, the arrival of the kindergarten model in Brazil represented not only an educational innovation, but also a space of symbolic dispute over what it meant to educate young children in a society marked by profound inequalities.

In Brazil, from 1888 onward, with the official abolition of slavery, debates intensified regarding the need to expand educational provision as a means of social participation and the reorganization of public life. Within this context, Froebelian-inspired kindergartens gained greater visibility. Until

then, the pioneering initiative of Menezes Vieira, in Rio de Janeiro, had remained restricted to children from elite families, functioning as a space of social distinction rather than as a policy aimed at democratizing access to education (Oliveira, 2002).

The creation of the first public kindergarten in 1896 by Gabriel Prestes, attached to the Caetano de Campos Normal School in São Paulo, represented an important milestone by incorporating Froebelian ideals into the educational project of the Paulista Republican Party. Nevertheless, although it was a public institution, it was not intended for children from the popular classes. Its clientele consisted largely of the children of the republican elite, revealing how early childhood schooling during that period was linked more closely to political interests and processes of cultural legitimization than to the effective democratization of the right to education.

The institution's team of female teachers, responsible for translating excerpts from Froebel's work and disseminating these conceptions throughout the country, gave rise to the *Revista do Jardim de Infância*, a publication that, while promoting pedagogical practices and knowledge, also reinforced the restricted circulation of this model (Kuhlmann Jr., 2000; Stemmer, 2012). Thus, the institutionalization of the kindergarten in Brazil emerged marked by tensions: between public and private spheres, between discourses of innovation and the maintenance of inequalities, and between the ideal of pedagogical modernity and the limits of its elitist appropriation.

Only in 1899 was the first daycare center intended for workers' children established in Rio de Janeiro, linked to the Corcovado Textile Factory. Other similar initiatives expanded during the early twentieth century, focusing on the children of domestic workers and industrial laborers (Kuhlmann Jr., 2000). This movement reveals how attention to childhood developed unevenly from its origins: while kindergartens became consolidated as spaces of prestige and pedagogical innovation aimed primarily at elites, daycare centers intended for the popular classes were

conceived through the lens of protection and basic care, remaining closer to welfare assistance than to an educational dimension.

For decades, the prevailing interpretation was that “institutions for poor children, such as daycare centers and asylum rooms, had a merely welfare-oriented character, whereas the kindergarten had an educational character” (Stemmer, 2012, p. 11). This dichotomy reinforced structural inequalities, legitimizing the idea that children from elite families deserved access to modern formative practices inspired by innovative pedagogical conceptions, while poor children should merely be cared for, kept under surveillance, and removed from the streets. Thus, the very genesis of Early Childhood Education in Brazil was shaped by social, political, and economic contradictions whose effects still reverberate in the ways this educational stage is conceived, organized, and valued.

The first initiatives aimed at recognizing children’s rights emerged primarily through international legislation. The Declaration of the Rights of the Child established the principle of considering children as subjects of rights, a relatively recent recognition in both world and local history, which helps explain the obstacles that persist regarding the full realization of these rights. In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child strengthened this perspective, directly influencing the Statute of the Child and Adolescent, enacted in Brazil the following year, which consolidated the principle of comprehensive protection.

In the Brazilian context, the Constitution of Brazil, in dialogue with this international framework, guarantees children’s right to education, including access to daycare centers and preschools. The Statute of the Child and Adolescent, Law No. 8.069/90, expands this guarantee by explicitly affirming fundamental rights such as life, health, food, education, leisure, culture, dignity, respect, freedom, and family and community coexistence, as well as protection against all forms of negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty, and oppression. In Article 100, sole paragraph,

the statute reaffirms the child as a subject of rights, marking a turning point in the way society should conceive of and treat children.

Thus, it is understood that the path toward the current configuration of Early Childhood Education in Brazil has been marked by struggles and historical achievements. The contrast between the welfare-oriented character of the first initiatives and the rights-based perspective inscribed in contemporary legislation reveals both significant advances and the challenges that remain in ensuring educational provision that truly recognizes children's dignity and citizenship.

Within this context, the Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional (LDB), in Article 29, consolidates the principle that access to this level of education is a child's right. Early Childhood Education is defined as the first stage of Basic Education, aimed at ensuring the integral development of children up to six years of age, encompassing physical, psychological, intellectual, and social dimensions, in complementarity with the actions of the family and the community (Brazil, 1996). This formulation represents an important normative advance by recognizing children not only as recipients of care, but also as subjects of a broad formative process in which the school assumes co-responsibility for guaranteeing the conditions necessary for their full development.

Before the enactment of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent, children and adolescents were legally conceived as incapable individuals, such that their rights could only be exercised by those who held parental authority, such as parents or guardians. With the ECA, a fundamental rupture occurred: children and adolescents ceased to be viewed as objects of guardianship and came to be recognized as subjects of rights, bearers of their own prerogatives and citizens in a peculiar condition of development.

Recognizing the child as a subject implies understanding childhood both as a "being in formation" and as a person already fully endowed with dignity, despite their young age, inserted within a historical, cultural, and social context that grants identity and voice. Thus, childhood is understood as a stage of life that

requires comprehensive protection but also respect for the child's active participation in their formative process (Gonçalves, 2016, p. 11).

In this sense, legislation advances by recognizing Early Childhood Education as the first stage of Basic Education, organized into daycare centers for children from 0 to 3 years old and preschools for children aged 4 and 5. These educational institutions, whether public or private, are characterized as non-domestic spaces that articulate the dimensions of education and care, serving children on either a part-time or full-time basis. Furthermore, they are linked to educational systems and are regulated, supervised, and subject to social oversight, as established by the Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para a Educação Infantil (DCNEI, 2009).

This brief historical overview of the experiences that gave rise to Early Childhood Education in Brazil makes it possible to understand how conceptions forged over time continue to influence contemporary practices. At the same time, it reveals the tensions between normative advances and material limitations, showing that the realization of the right to Early Childhood Education requires not only legal frameworks, but also structural, political, and pedagogical conditions capable of ensuring socially referenced quality.

The historical trajectory of Early Childhood Education in Brazil reveals continuities that cannot be ignored. The welfare-oriented legacy inherited from the first institutions, together with the selective appropriation of pedagogical models, still resonates in practices that subordinate teaching and, at other times, reinforce the idea that it is sufficient merely to provide care and spaces for socialization. While, on the one hand, we recognize the importance of the legal and conceptual advances that established the child as a subject of rights, on the other hand, it is necessary to acknowledge that the effective realization of this principle still faces significant barriers.

The challenge facing Early Childhood Education today is not merely to distance itself from the spontaneity that weakens pedagogical action, nor simply to overcome the old welfare-oriented approach that reduces the school to a space of mere custody. The issue is more complex: it requires the ability

to critically revisit the inherited repertoire, recognizing within it both fruitful possibilities and historical limitations. It is not a matter of repeating the past or rejecting it entirely, but rather of interrogating its marks and, from them, projecting new ways of thinking about and practicing an Early Childhood Education that is genuinely committed to children's development and to the possible utopia of a more just and habitable world.

Childhoods in Early Childhood Education

Thinking about childhood in the contemporary world means dealing with contradictions. On the one hand, childhood is situated within a context marked by globalization, digital interconnection, and technological advancement; on the other hand, it continues to be crossed by profound social inequalities that limit many children's access to dignified living conditions and, particularly, to quality education. This ambiguity reveals that childhood cannot be understood as a homogeneous experience, but rather as a field of disputes shaped by social, political, and economic tensions.

By understanding childhood as a historical, cultural, and social construction, and the child as a subject of rights and a producer of culture, we challenge conceptions that reduce childhood to biology or to the idea of a merely preparatory phase of life. The history of childhood as a social category is not identical to the history of the child as a subject. The term *childhood* refers to an attributed social place, whereas *child* refers to the concrete individuals who occupy that place. As Mello (2007, p. 90) reminds us, "childhood is the time in which the child should be introduced to the richness of historically and socially created human culture, reproducing for themselves specifically human qualities."

However, it is necessary to be attentive to the risk of a strictly anthropocentric conception of human formation, one that reduces formative experience to an exclusively human horizon and disregards the multiple interactions that constitute life. In this sense, childhood cannot be conceived

solely as a stage of incorporating historically accumulated culture, but also as a space for building ethical, aesthetic, and ecological bonds that recognize the interdependence among human beings, nature, and other forms of life. By broadening this perspective, it becomes possible to understand children's formation not only as a process of socialization, but also as exercise in inhabiting the world in relation to others and to different forms of life, within a horizon that transcends anthropocentric boundaries in order to ensure the continuity of human life on the planet.

Problematizing the distinction between child and childhood implies asking: into what kind of world are our children being called to enter, and to which cultures and ways of life are they being given access? Childhood, historically situated, must be understood not as a settled and pure given, but as a socially constructed phenomenon. Assis and Melo (2013) argue that it is necessary to understand "what children need in order to appropriate socially produced culture and, at the same time, produce culture." This is a two-way process: the child receives and re-elaborates, learns and recreates, positioning themselves within a dynamic and relational process.

Culture, in its broadest sense, is not absorbed spontaneously; it is presented to children by adults and by other children. In this movement, as Mello (2007) observes, the child internalizes human qualities that do not emerge solely from biology but are also constructed through social interaction. Therefore, childhood is not static: it is crossed by symbolic, political, and material disputes that reflect the historical context in which it is situated.

Survival, in any species, requires processes of learning and adaptation to the environment. In the case of human beings, this learning assumes specific forms, since it involves both the material production of life and the symbolic mediation of culture, which gives education a central role. To be human is therefore a process of becoming, realized in and through formation. Childhood, in this sense, is not reduced to a chronological stage, but represents a privileged period in which possibilities for constitution and development are opened through social, cultural, and environmental interactions.

It is not a matter of idealizing or praising the conditions of the past, nor of accepting inherited culture exactly as it presents itself, but rather of formulating a critical analysis of the factors that constrain the present and limit our possibilities for the future. In times of ecological crisis, marked by resource depletion, the commodification of life, and the reproduction of the myth of the commodity as the measure of all things, it becomes imperative to re-elaborate culture and its forms of sociability. Within this horizon, the central ethical and political challenge lies in restoring the well-being of the Collective, human and non-human alike, as a fundamental goal beyond the logic of accumulation and consumption.

This understanding makes evident that outside the human environment there is neither survival nor the full constitution of humanity, since the human being is a social animal. The human baby, at birth, depends on adults to remain within the species as living beings, to acquire language, values, and knowledge, in short, to attain the human condition. Childhood, from this perspective, is the space and time in which the child's entry into the accumulated cultural heritage is forged, making the child not only an heir to culture, but also a producer of it.

For this reason, the concept of childhood is not neutral. The representations that underpin social and pedagogical practices directly influence the places children occupy, their potentialities, and the modes of their development.

Thus, to adopt a conception of childhood means recognizing that it is traversed by contradictions, disputes, and mediations. It means thinking of the child not as an abstract becoming, but as a historical subject who, from an early age, relates to culture and transforms it. This perspective shifts Early Childhood Education away from a merely welfare-oriented or preparatory role toward a profound political and ethical field: one committed to ensuring that all children can look at the world, appropriate it, and, above all, recreate it.

Teacher Education in/for Early Childhood Education

Thinking about teacher education for Early Childhood Education, as well as within the professional context itself, implies revisiting one of the most persistent tensions in the field of education: the relationship between theory and practice. Within Early Childhood Education, this issue becomes even more sensitive, since teachers' daily actions, marked by the urgency of care and the demand to respond to immediate situations, tend to reinforce the valorization of practical knowledge to the detriment of theoretical reflection. This asymmetry is not trivial; it expresses a way of conceiving teaching that, by dissociating theory from practice, risks reducing the teacher to the condition of a mere executor of tasks, emptying the profession of its intellectual and critical character.

Antonio Gramsci (1989), through his conception of praxis, warns us about the risk of alienation when practice becomes disconnected from critical reflection. Practice without theory does not emancipate itself; it becomes the repetition of what is already instituted, an alienated gesture that reproduces, without questioning, the conditions of its own existence (Baptista and Palhamo, 2012). In this sense, demystifying the separation between theory and practice is an urgent formative task. Teaching, far from being a mere extension of care, is an intellectual profession, defined precisely by the capacity to think about reality, analyze it, and intervene in it consciously and intentionally.

However, initial teacher education often remains marked by fragmentation, superficial readings of isolated excerpts, and the absence of consistent theoretical mediation. It is therefore unsurprising that eclecticism and the dissemination of oversimplified perspectives gain ground, reproducing conceptual misunderstandings. In such cases, criticism of traditional schooling, when unsupported by consistent theoretical grounding, tends to turn into a posture that rejects the past without, however, offering intellectually consistent alternatives for the present.

This observation highlights a crucial point: it is not enough merely to exchange experiences or share practices; it is necessary for both initial and continuing teacher education to become spaces of critical appropriation, in which teachers confront the complexity of concepts, move from the abstract to the concrete and return to it through a dialectical movement (Duarte, 2006), and become capable of questioning their own conceptions and modes of action. In this process, pedagogical praxis ceases to be mere reproduction or adaptation and instead becomes an intentionally problematizing and transformative activity, capable of articulating theoretical reflection and teaching practice.

The challenge, therefore, lies not only in valuing practice, but in articulating practice and theory dialectically. The denial of theory in the name of practice is a theoretical position, even if unrecognized (Saviani, 2011). It is thus a matter of reclaiming the right to historically accumulated knowledge, not as sterile erudition, but as a condition for teacher emancipation. Through access to systematized thought, teachers can recognize themselves as intellectuals of educational practice, capable of intervening critically and disputing the meanings of their profession.

Within this horizon, continuing teacher education, like initial teacher education, emerges as a privileged space of production. Although marked by the urgencies of daily life, work overload, and the difficulty of finding time for reading and study, it can reveal to teachers the importance of revisiting theoretical texts, collectively constructing interpretations, and appropriating alternative perspectives. This movement is not simple: it demands effort, time, and the courage to confront one's own certainties. Yet it is precisely within this process of estrangement and reflection that teaching can reinvent itself.

Defending the unity between theory and practice is therefore more than merely methodological debate; it means reaffirming teaching as an intellectual profession and as a space to produce historical meaning. It means recognizing that the act of teaching is not limited to the application of techniques but rather involves the development of grounded practices guided by an understanding of reality. Within this horizon, it is argued that there can be no emancipatory

education without teachers who can grasp the historicity of their profession, problematizing the conditions that shape it, and intervening intentionally and knowledgeably in the transformation of reality.

The Social Devaluation of Early Childhood Education and Its Professionals

“Aunt,” second mother, sufferer, heroine, education specialist, learning manager, mediator, transformative agent, idealist, curator of knowledge, missionary, ideological agent, indoctrinator, activist. Countless metaphors have been attributed to Early Childhood Education teachers, and to male teachers, to the point that it becomes almost impossible to enumerate them all. This multiplicity of images, far from being merely a linguistic detail, expresses the complexity of teacher identity and highlights the centrality of teaching within society, while also revealing historical marks of gender that continue to permeate the profession.

Metaphors are not neutral: they express expectations, values, and disputes surrounding the teaching profession. Some reinforce its affective and vocational dimension, such as the idea of the teacher as an “aunt” or second mother; others evoke an ethical-political commitment, such as transformative agent or activist; still others reduce teaching work to technical functions, such as learning manager or specialist. In all of them, however, there is an implicit agreement that the teacher occupies a strategic position in the production and circulation of knowledge, in the formation of subjects, and in the Maintenance, or contestation, of the social order.

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic made the fundamental place occupied by schools strikingly evident. With the closure of educational institutions, it was not only the educational routine that was suspended, but also the very organization of social life. Families, institutions, and the world of work acutely felt how deeply the functioning of schools structures the time and space of collective life. In this context, it became impossible to deny that

teachers are indispensable professionals and that their work extends far beyond the mere transmission of content: they are responsible for specific forms of social interaction, for the learning of fundamental knowledge, for cultural formation, and for the very maintenance of the social fabric.

Understanding the processes that constituted the devaluation of Early Childhood Education and, consequently, of the professionals who work within it is not a simple task. Far from being reduced to a punctual diagnosis, it requires revisiting a history crossed by political, economic, and cultural interests that shaped the place of childhood and its educators within society. The body of research accumulated in this field, especially within the history of education, demonstrates that this devaluation is not accidental, but rather the result of social and political choices that continue to reverberate in current working conditions and in the recognition of the teaching profession.

The incorporation of kindergartens in Brazil, often subordinated to local political interests, contributed to the formation of a fragile professional identity. Since the 1970s, the expansion of daycare centers and preschools has been marked by the dilemma between quantity and quality: social movements' demands and the massive entry of women into the labor market were addressed, but through improvised structures, scarce resources, and professionals who often lacked adequate qualifications. This historical trajectory consolidated the view of Early Childhood Education more as a welfare-oriented space than as a legitimate stage of schooling.

Alessandra Arce (2001, 2008) demonstrates how improvised practices, the use of idle spaces, volunteer work, and the selection of personnel based on goodwill profoundly shaped the field, naturalizing the idea that caring for and educating young children would be a task that any woman, especially mothers, could undertake. This imaginary became consolidated in official documents and public policies, sustained by the myth of the "born educator," which associated the role of the teacher with motherhood and a spirit of self-sacrifice, rendering invisible the intellectual and professional character of teaching.

International influences reinforced this framework. Models disseminated by UNESCO and UNICEF during the 1970s and 1980s, aimed at poorer countries, emphasized low-cost solutions and improvisation. These models justified the employment of unqualified teachers, low salaries, and limited access to pedagogical materials (Rosemberg, 2012). Although there were internal forms of resistance, such as the proposals advanced by the General Coordination for Early Childhood Education (COEDI) in the 1990s, the subsequent adoption of guidelines linked to the World Bank reinforced the logic of volunteerism and non-professionalism, perpetuating the precarization of the profession.

This historical context is not merely a matter of the past: its marks continue to echo in the contemporary narratives of teachers, who still report social and professional devaluation even after decades of debate concerning the legitimacy of Early Childhood Education as a stage of Basic Education. Apparently trivial expressions, such as the persistent habit of referring to teachers as “aunts,” reveal how the social imaginary still associates their role more with affection and care than with intellectual and pedagogical dimensions.

In Brazil, teaching in Basic Education continues to be marked by the predominance of women. According to data from the 2024 School Census, approximately 687,000 teachers work in Brazilian Early Childhood Education. This is the stage of Basic Education with the highest predominance of women in teaching positions, representing 96.1% of all professionals, a percentage that reaches 97.1% in daycare centers and 93.9% in preschools. Regarding age groups, there is a greater concentration of teachers between 30 and 49 years old, especially among those aged 30 to 39 and 40 to 49. These figures highlight not only the feminization of the profession, but also the persistence of social representations that associate teaching with functions traditionally attributed to women.

The problem, however, goes beyond statistical observation. It involves confronting conceptions that naturalize teaching work in Early Childhood Education as an extension of the home, a spontaneous maternal practice, or

a welfare-oriented activity. Such views diminish the professionalism of teachers and reinforce gender inequalities by displacing teaching into the sphere of private and devalued care. At the same time, they hinder the struggle for better salaries, improved working conditions, and the recognition of Early Childhood Education as a fully formative space, fundamental to human and social development.

Overcoming this legacy requires recognizing that professional devaluation is not merely the result of material precariousness, but also of historical and cultural conceptions that persist. It is therefore necessary to articulate both initial and continuing teacher education with a radical critique of these roots, deconstructing myths and confronting the marks of welfare-oriented approaches and spontaneity. Such a task is, above all, political: it implies disputing conceptions of childhood, school, and the teaching profession within a context in which there remains a tendency to reduce Early Childhood Education to a space of custody or care.

Being attentive to the historical traps that repeatedly devalue the teaching profession is essential in this field. Recognizing the myth of the “born educator” and problematizing the welfare-oriented character historically attributed to Early Childhood Education constitute initial steps in a broader movement toward professional valorization. This means displacing crystallized conceptions that reduce teaching to an extension of motherhood or to simple caregiving. In this sense, the field of teacher education bears the responsibility of creating spaces for reflection and critique capable of transforming this recognition into collective practice, strengthening the struggle for dignified working conditions and for a conception of Early Childhood Education that overcomes the legacy of improvisation, volunteerism, and professional dequalification.

Early Childhood Education possesses a vast repertoire of content and experiences to be explored with children under six years of age, without compromising the playful and pleasurable character of schooling (Faria, Silva, and Carvalho, 2025). On the contrary, when pedagogical practice is

grounded in content connected to everyday life, while respecting children's rhythms and ways of learning, possibilities emerge for experiences that integrate culture, knowledge, and sensitivity.

It is important to emphasize that, regardless of the pedagogical approach adopted in Early Childhood Education, the teacher's work is never reduced to neutral or automatic execution. Teacher subjectivity is constantly challenged, shaped, and disseminated through the statements that compose pedagogical discourse. In other words, teachers are always called upon to respond to certain expectations and to act according to prescriptions that position them within a specific field of governance. Even though theories and methodologies may vary, teaching continues to be constituted within this intersection of discourses, where ways of being, teaching, and relating to childhood are defined.

It is within this horizon that the relevance of both initial and continuing teacher education becomes evident, as spaces for critical reflection on teaching and learning. There is no teaching without learning, nor learning without teaching. However, in Early Childhood Education, this unity is often obscured by myths that naturalize the separation between the two, or even by the idea that teaching would somehow be harmful to young children. Such misconceptions still circulate within practices and conceptions, and it is the role of teacher education to create openings for their problematization.

Throughout this trajectory, we recognize that all pedagogical approaches within Early Childhood Education form part of the historically accumulated body of knowledge and therefore need to be considered. Constructivism, for example, expanded the recognition of the child as an active subject; the Pedagogy of Childhood contributed by emphasizing the importance of collective experiences; Historical-Critical Pedagogy, in turn, stresses the centrality of teaching as the intentional mediation of historically produced knowledge. Mobilizing these different contributions does not mean regressing, but rather critically revisiting what has already been developed to rethink limitations, gather lessons, and advance in the construction of new theoretical and practical frameworks.

Rather than adopting a pedagogical approach dogmatically, it is necessary to deepen the study of each perspective, understand the context in which it emerged, analyze its relevance considering contemporary challenges, and seek creative articulations capable of strengthening the quality of Early Childhood Education. It is therefore a matter of assuming an investigative and critical stance, without losing sight of the commitment to children's integral development and to the social function of the school as a formative space.

Perhaps this is the principal role of both initial and continuing teacher education in Early Childhood Education: to understand that work with childhood cannot dispense with conscious, planned, and intentional pedagogical action. It becomes evident that the valorization of the teaching profession in Early Childhood Education depends upon understanding the teacher as an intellectual subject, a producer of culture, and an agent of transformation. Critically recognizing and mobilizing the legacy of different pedagogical traditions is therefore a condition for affirming the school as a space of emancipation and for guaranteeing children the fundamental right to knowledge, play, action, and life in its fullness.

Final Considerations

The production of knowledge about teachers and their work in Early Childhood Education should not presume the task of shaping the political will of others, but rather of challenging established truths by interrogating what presents itself as natural, evident, or unquestionable. This stance shifts produced knowledge away from a position of absolute authority and into the field of critique, in which the ethical commitment lies not in offering ready-made answers, but in opening spaces for problematization. It is precisely by questioning the foundations of what appears obvious that living knowledge is produced, knowledge capable of revealing the historical, cultural, and political forces that sustain educational discourses.

However, this movement also challenges us to recognize its own limits: if it is not our role to tell others what they should do, neither is it possible to abdicate the political responsibility that permeates all knowledge production. The tension between critique and engagement is, in this sense, constitutive of reflection in education, and perhaps it is precisely there that its transformative potential resides.

Teaching work cannot be equated with the manipulation of objects, since it is carried out through interaction with singular, active, and unpredictable subjects. Each child, in their developmental process, cannot be standardized or fully controlled, but instead requires listening, negotiation, and recognition of their condition as a historical and cultural subject. From this perspective, educational practice assumes a multidimensional character, involving ethical, normative, emotional, and social dimensions that go far beyond the mere technical application of methods. Unlike work performed on material objects, Early Childhood Education is grounded primarily in symbolic technologies, gestures, narratives, languages, and affections — which constitute the means through which teachers promote meaningful learning. Thus, teachers do not merely transmit knowledge; they create conditions for children to appropriate culture and, at the same time, produce culture, reaffirming the formative character of pedagogical practice (Alves, 2024).

Exercising this critical role is not only an academic exercise, but also an ethical and political responsibility: opening spaces through which teachers may recognize the conditions shaping their practices while also envisioning new possibilities for intervention.

Teaching work in Early Childhood Education reveals a field permeated by ambiguities, contradictions, and suspicions that demand critical analysis. From the outset, a central ambiguity emerges throughout its history, Early Childhood Education has oscillated between being understood as a space of assistance and as a legitimate educational stage. This welfare-oriented origin has permeated practices and conceptions that still resonate today, sometimes subordinating teaching and at other times reducing teaching work to an

extension of motherhood. Here lies a persistent contradiction: although current legislation affirms the child as a subject of rights and the teacher as a mediator of learning, remnants of a tutelary and improvised view of teaching continue to survive in practice.

Another contradiction concerns teacher education itself. Although the importance of articulating theory and practice is widely acknowledged, what often prevails are superficial readings, methodological eclecticism, and the dissemination of oversimplified perspectives. This may result in only an apparent critique of traditional schooling: past practices are rejected, yet often without the theoretical grounding capable of sustaining more consistent and transformative alternative proposals.

From this emerges a significant suspicion: teacher devaluation cannot be explained solely by material precariousness, but also by the reproduction of discourses that naturalize the teacher's role, obscuring their condition as intellectuals and political agents. Both spontaneity — which weakens pedagogical mediation and may empty teaching of its formative dimension — and dogmatism, which rigidifies practice and reduces teaching action to the mere application of pre-established models, deny children the right to access culturally produced knowledge in its complexity and historicity. The challenge lies in constructing intentional, critical, and creative pedagogical practices that recognize teaching as intellectual work and as an essential mediation in the formation of new generations.

It may therefore be said that teaching work in Early Childhood Education is situated at this intersection of forces: between care and teaching, between valorization and disqualification, between emancipatory promise and the risk of reproducing myths. The challenge is to assume these ambiguities as objects of critical reflection rather than of naturalization, repositioning teaching as an intellectual and political profession. Suspicion, in this sense, does not paralyze; rather, it opens pathways: it is the condition for interrogating what presents itself as obvious and, in doing so, reinventing the role of the teacher in the education of young children.

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Received in January 2026.

Approved in June 2026.