

The Gender Silencing in the BNCC: an obstacle to quality service in Early Childhood Education¹

*O silenciamento de gênero na BNCC:
entrave para um atendimento de qualidade na Educação Infantil*

*El silenciamiento de género en la BNCC:
un obstáculo para una atención de calidad en la Educación Infantil*

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Abstract: This article aims to raise some reflections on the gender silencing in the BNCC and the possible relationships with the provision of quality care in Early Childhood Education. This excerpt presents the initial considerations of a doctoral research that aims to analyze the proposals for Early Childhood Education present in the Base Nacional Comum Curricular – BNCC (BRASIL, 2017) from a gender perspective. It intends to demonstrate that the silencing of gender demands in a mandatory and nationwide document tends to hinder the provision of quality care in Early Childhood Education as a right for all children.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education; Gender; BNCC; Silencing; Quality.

Resumo: Este artigo tem por finalidade levantar algumas reflexões acerca do silenciamento de gênero na BNCC e as possíveis relações com a oferta de um atendimento de qualidade na Educação Infantil. Este recorte traz as considerações iniciais de uma pesquisa de doutorado que tem por objetivo analisar as propostas para a Educação Infantil presentes na Base Nacional Comum Curricular – BNCC (BRASIL, 2017) sob a ótica das questões de gênero. Pretende-se demonstrar que o silenciamento das demandas de gênero, em um documento obrigatório e de abrangência nacional tende a dificultar a oferta de um atendimento de qualidade para Educação Infantil enquanto um direito de todas as crianças.

Palavras-Chave: Educação Infantil; Gênero; BNCC; Silenciamento; Qualidade.

Resumen: Este artículo tiene como objetivo generar algunas reflexiones sobre el silenciamiento de género en la Base Nacional Común Curricular (BNCC) y sus posibles relaciones con la oferta de una atención de calidad en la educación infantil. Este enfoque presenta las consideraciones iniciais de una tesis doctoral que tuvo como propósito analizar las propuestas para la educación infantil presente en la BNCC (BRASIL, 2017) desde la

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perspectiva de género. Se pretende demostrar que el silenciamiento de las demandas de género en un documento obligatorio y de alcance nacional tiende a dificultar la oferta de una atención de calidad en la educación infantil como un derecho de los niños y las niñas.

Palabras clave: Educación Infantil; Género; BNCC; Silenciamiento; Calidad.

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Introduction

The implementation of the *Base Nacional Comum Curricular* (BNCC) (Brasil, 2017) is based on the idea of creating a curriculum framework that, in theory, would guarantee equitable education by establishing a minimum common content to be offered by all schools in the country. While discussions about a framework date back to the 1980s (CÁSSIO, 2019), the development of a curriculum organization document was addressed explicitly in Goal 7 of the National Education Plan (Brasil, 2014).

Amid a context of tension and political dispute, culminating in the parliamentary coup that led to the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, under the interim government of Michel Temer, the version of the BNCC (Brasil, 2017) under analysis was approved, covering the stages of Early Childhood Education and Elementary Education. A version covering High School was only approved in 2018.

For Early Childhood Education, the document stipulates six learning rights: coexistence, play, participation, exploration, expression, and Self-knowledge. It is organized into five areas of experience: Self, Other, and Us; Body, Gestures, and Movements; Lines, Sounds, Colors, and Form; Listening; Speech, Thought, and Imagination; and Spaces, Times, Quantities, Relationships, and Transformations.

Each field of experience presents a series of learning objectives divided by three age groups: infants (0 to 1 year and 6 months), very young children (1 year and 7 months to 3 years and 11 months), and toddlers (4 years to 5 years and 11 months).

The hypothesis is that the fragmentation of knowledge expressed in the multitude of learning objectives for each field of experience tends to hinder the understanding of a child's comprehensive development, and that the silencing of gender issues hinders discussion on the topic in the school environment. Such debate is essential to ensuring quality and equitable education for all, as well as acting as an educational measure to prevent unequal gender relations.

Thinking about broader issues, it is important to consider that Brazil has alarming rates of violence against women. The *Panorama da violência contra as mulheres no Brasil* (BRASIL, 2018) warns of underreporting, as many victims struggle to report crimes and estimate that only 10% of cases are reported, making it difficult to access real figures on violence indicators.

The Atlas da Violência 2019 (IPEA; FBSP, 2019), the result of a 2019 survey by the University of São Paulo in partnership with the Brazilian Public Security Forum, detected an increase in femicide rates, indicating that a woman was killed every seven hours in Brazil.

Statistics demonstrate that, like women, children are also victims of violence in the country. The Brazilian Public Security Forum identified an increase in violence against children and adolescents in 2022:

Table 1 – Variation in reported crimes among children and adolescents (0 to 17 years old). *Brazil, 2021-2022*

| Type of Crime | 2021 | 2022 | Variation (in%) |
|------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| | Absolute Numbers | Absolute Numbers | |
| Abandonment of an Incapable Person | 8197 | 9348 | 14.0 |
| Material Abandonment | 826 | 879 | 1.8 |
| Maltreatment | 19799 | 22527 | 13.8 |
| Bodily Harm in Domestic Violence | 14856 | 15370 | 3.5 |
| Rape | 45076 | 51971 | 15.3 |
| Child Pornography | 1523 | 1630 | 7.0 |
| Sexual Exploitation | 764 | 889 | 16.4 |

Source: Public Security and/or Social Defense Offices (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, 2023, p. 189).

In both 2021 and 2022, the high rate of rape cases is evident, accounting for roughly half of all reported cases of violence in both periods (45,076 cases out of 91,041 reported cases in 2021 and 51,971 cases out of 102,614 reported cases in 2022, an average of 50% and 51%, respectively), even without considering other types of sexual crimes.

Rape is the most frequently reported type of crime against children and adolescents in Brazil. In 2022, there were nearly 41,000 victims aged 0 to 13, of which almost 7,000 were between 0 and 4 years old, over 11,000 were between 5 and 9 years old, over 22,000 were between 10 and 13 years old, and over 11,000 were between 14 and 17 years old. Among female victims, there is a peak in cases between 3 and 4 years of age, and from age nine onward, the number of cases increases, reaching its peak with victims aged 13. Among male victims, although there are fewer cases, the peak occurs at age 4 (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, 2023, p.190-191).

The Ministry of Health published an *Epidemiological Bulletin* with reports of sexual violence against children and adolescents from 2015 to 2021, announcing a total of 202,948 reports, with 41.2% of victims being children (83,571 cases) and 58.8% being adolescents (119,377 cases). According to the report, 76.8% of child victims of sexual violence are girls, with Black girls being the most affected in the study in question.

The Bulletin warns that most cases occur in the victim's home or in familiar surroundings, and that the perpetrators are often relatives or close associates. These data highlight the importance of discussing gender in schools, including identifying potential cases of sexual violence in which children may be victims.

The Ministry of Health report also highlights a possible underreporting of data, as there was a reduction in reports in 2020, during the period of social distancing caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that most cases occur in family settings, it is possible that many incidents went unreported during this period. The time children were away from school during the pandemic may have masked the actual violence data.

Law No. 11,340 of August 7, 2006, popularly known as the Maria da Penha Law, established a significant legal framework for protecting women who are victims of violence. Article eight of the law provides for educational measures to curb violence rates, and in this Article, Section IX is noteworthy:

Emphasis, in school curricula at all levels of education, on content related to human rights, gender and racial or ethnic equality, and the problem of domestic and family violence against women (BRASIL, 2006, p.17).

The *Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para a Educação Infantil* (DCNEI) (BRASIL, 2009), among the specific legislation for education, is noteworthy for its commitment to “[...] breaking relations of age, socioeconomic, ethnic-racial, gender, regional, linguistic, and religious domination” (Brasil, 2009, p.17), establishing criteria for schools to fulfill their sociopolitical and pedagogical functions.

The debate on gender in education, despite the recommendations of the DCNEI and the Maria da Penha Law, faces strong opposition in the political arena. Conservative movements use the fallacy of “gender ideology” and the supposed defense of families to gain popularity and, consequently, votes, vehemently opposing the inclusion of this issue in public policies.

The *Escola Sem Partido* (ESP) movement can be considered one of the leading representatives of these conservative movements that spread moral panic to garner political capital. While the ESP declared its closure in 2019 after facing unconstitutionality lawsuits, the *modus operandi* of the movement’s coreligionists remains alive among conservative political actors.

[...] In this moment of regression of the Rule of law and democracy in which we live today, there is a substantial decline in this agenda and the rise of all forms of fascism. National identity is once again being disputed, with the portrayal of difference and/or diversity as aberrations and deviations, and, if possible, their eradication from the public and educational spheres. This occurred, for example, with the ban on debate on gender relations, so forcefully introduced in the process of approving the State and Municipal Education Plans; with the prohibition of speeches considered political/ideological by teachers, now presented through Bill No. 867/2015 and other similar bills currently under consideration in various states and the Federal District; and, finally, with the nefarious partisan ideological proposal of a nonpartisan education. (Abramowicz and Tebet, 2017, p.197).

Political pressure from conservative movements has resulted in mentions of the word “gender” being removed from public education policies. Similar to what happened with Municipal and State Education Plans, gender-related issues were also removed from the BNCC (Brasil, 2017).

Given the rates of violence against women and children presented here, considering that legal frameworks confirm the importance of educational measures to reduce inequalities that include gender issues, and considering the strong political opposition to this issue, it is crucial to analyze whether and how recent public policies, such as the BNCC (Brasil, 2017), address such matters.

This article, based on the postulate on Maria Laura Puglisi Barbosa Franco’s content analysis (2005), aims to analyze and draw inferences about how gender is addressed in the BNCC (BRASIL, 2017) and to raise some reflections on how this topic relates to the provision of quality services for Early Childhood Education. Franco (2005) criticizes the limitations of merely descriptive analyses and links the theoretical relevance of research to the importance

of comparisons and contextualization based on “the researcher’s sensitivity, intentionality, and theoretical competence” (Franco, 2005, p.16).

Gender in Early Childhood Education

Despite political objections to the topic of gender in education, especially Early Childhood Education, it is important to understand that the expansion of this stage of basic education has its origins in the feminist movement for equal civil rights, which included the right to daycare in public institutions and the entry of women into the workforce.

Early childhood education institutions were proposed as a means of bringing families together to mitigate social conflicts, as a means of educating for an egalitarian society, as an instrument for liberating women from the burden of domestic obligations, and as a way to overcome the limitations of the family structure. Socialist and feminist ideas, in this case, directed the issue of addressing poverty toward considering child education in collective facilities, as a way to guarantee mothers the right to work. The struggle for public, democratic, and popular preschool was intertwined with the battle for broader political and social transformation (Kuhlmann Jr., 2000, p.11).

Gender-related issues in education have historically been relegated to science or biology teaching, as the subject’s focus on studying the biological determinants of human anatomy has often disregarded the cultural, historical, and social implications of the topic.

Studies conducted by Daniela Finco (2003, 2004, and 2010) confirm this objection to the topic of gender, particularly in Early Childhood Education, and reveal flawed practices in the school environment that tend to reinforce stereotypical patterns and unequal gender relations. According to the author, “schools are not neutral: they participate subtly and unequally in the construction of gender identity” (Finco, 2003, p.99)

Finco (2010) criticizes the lack of proposals addressing gender diversity in childhood in public education policies and highlights the importance of providing meaningful training for education professionals. Along the same lines, Cláudia Vianna and Sandra Unbehaum (2006) highlight the State’s responsibilities in this context:

The consolidation of gender in public education policies is a State task, and this will depend on the availability of resources and the inclusion of gender-related demands in education by subsequent governments. This should not be limited to specific demands in one aspect or another of the

curriculum. This task requires, among other measures, a curricular review that includes not only a gender perspective in teacher training, but also those of class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and generation. More than that, it is necessary to include gender and all the dimensions responsible for the construction of inequalities, as central elements of a project to overcome social inequalities, as fundamental objects of structural and social change (Vianna and Unbehaum, 2006, p.422).

Cláudia Vianna and Daniela Finco (2009) recognize the potential of schools as a privileged space for social, cultural, and educational inclusion, reinforcing the importance of discussing gender issues by linking it to the right to a quality Early Childhood Education:

The right to a quality Early Childhood Education includes discussing gender issues. Children's relationships in Early Childhood Education are one of the ways boys and girls are introduced to social life, mainly because they offer the opportunity to interact with children from different social classes, religions, and ethnicities, with distinct values and behaviors (Vianna and Finco, 2009, p.271).

Given the importance of gender issues in ensuring a quality education for all, including in Early Childhood Education, it is necessary to question the silencing of gender in the BNCC (BRASIL, 2017). The document's stated objectives include ensuring equitable education for all. How can this goal be achieved while silencing such essential issues?

Silencing Gender in the BNCC

On December 17, 2017, the *Base Nacional Comum Curricular* (BNCC) was approved (Brasil, 2017). Days before its approval, news circulated that interim President Michel Temer had removed all mentions of the term "gender" from the document. This maneuver met the demands of conservative movements and the so-called *evangelical bloc*, which spread moral panic on social media in an attempt to gain popularity with voters.

An analysis of the BNCC (Brasil, 2017) reveals, beyond its absence of gender issues, that it is a generic document marked by contradictions. While the document claims to break with the fragmentation of content, it carries within it a content-based and fragmented vision that dates back to the *Referencial Curricular Nacional para a Educação Infantil* (RCNEI) (Brasil, 1998). It acknowledges that human development does not occur linearly, yet maintains a focus on competencies based on the individual skills to be developed at each age group. It affirms a commitment to diversity, but what we see is a silence regarding these demands.

From the outset, a letter signed by then-Minister Mendonça Filho acknowledges alignment with multilateral organizations and a focus on competency as a set of skills to be acquired at each stage of basic education. The focus on the development of skills and competencies is strongly encouraged throughout the document:

In the BNCC, **competency** is defined as the mobilization of knowledge (concepts and procedures), skills (practical, cognitive, and socio-emotional), attitudes, and values to resolve complex demands of daily life, the whole exercise of citizenship, and the world of work (Brasil, 2017, p. 8)

According to the BNCC/2017, the focus on competencies is based on commitments to the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda, aiming to promote social transformation and environmental preservation. Bianca Correa (2019) compares the 2016 version of the framework with the 2017 version and makes essential considerations about the framework's alignment with the 2030 Agenda. According to the author, Brazil has advanced legislation for Early Childhood Education, even though she recognizes that this right is not consistently implemented in practice. She argues that alignment with this agenda is a step backward, as it allows, for example, preschool to be mandatory for only one year. Additionally, the pact still maintains the understanding of Early Childhood Education (ECE) as preparation for elementary school and focuses on child assessment.

An analysis of the document also suggests that diversity is treated superficially and generically, almost always restricted to cultural expressions and tied to regionality, without mentioning inequalities and prejudices, and without identifying the discriminated subjects and ways to combat these issues.

The focus on developing competencies and skills is maintained in the proposals for Early Childhood Education in the BNCC (Brasil, 2017). The document establishes a series of learning objectives for each field within the five domains of experience. Despite claiming a break with fragmentation into distinct content, the BNCC (Brasil, 2017) presents a linear conception of human development by listing a series of rights/learning objectives to be achieved at a given age.

It is essential to highlight that, by establishing learning objectives as skills to be acquired at a given age, the *right* to education moves towards a sense of *duty*, and demonstrates that the BNCC (Brasil, 2017) lacks a better understanding of education and childhood.

Gender, Early Childhood Education, and Quality

Quality is a polysemic term, but quality in Early Childhood Education is a concept that has been discussed since the 2000s, both in research (Correa, 2003 and 2018; Campos; Monção, 2013) and in official documents, such as the Quality Parameters (Brasil, 2006) and the *Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para a Educação Infantil* (DCNEI) (Brasil, 2009). Thus, some consensus was reached in the field regarding the quality criteria to be guaranteed throughout this period.

Among these consensuses, we can mention the number of children per class, since to guarantee rights such as individual attention, protection, affection, expression of feelings, and attention during the reception period, it is necessary to ensure a good child-to-teacher ratio.

Another agreement among the quality criteria concerns the inseparability of care and education, as in Early Childhood Education, it is impossible, for example, to separate the actions of feeding, hygiene, soothing, and rocking from the educational activities that occur simultaneously.

In 2009, the DCNEI set was revised, defining interactions and play as the structuring axes of ECE work, making these two fundamental criteria for assessing the quality of ECE. More recently, in 2024, the *Diretrizes Operacionais de Qualidade e Equidade para a Educação Infantil* were approved through Resolution 01, dated October 17, 2024. According to its content, quality is expressed through five dimensions: Democratic Management, Identity and Professional Training, Pedagogical Proposal, Evaluation of ECE, and Infrastructure, Buildings, and Materials.

However, concerning gender specifically, has this been a marker adopted as a quality indicator in documents and research? We can confirm that the document entitled “Critérios para um atendimento em creches que respeite os direitos fundamentais das crianças,” initially published in 1995 and reissued in 2009, remains a valuable reference for other vital materials published by the Ministry of Education (MEC) to this day. In this document, along with its criteria regarding what rights should be considered, we find the following:

Girls also participate in games that develop broad movement skills, such as running, throwing, and jumping.

Our boys and girls have the opportunity to play ball, including soccer.

Our boys and girls develop their strength, agility, and physical balance through activities conducted in spacious areas.

Our boys and girls can, from a very young age, play and explore outdoor spaces.

Our boys and girls have the right to express sadness and frustration.

We seek to teach boys and girls how to express and manage their feelings and impulses.

Boys and girls have the same rights and responsibilities (Brasil, 2009, online)

In the DCNEI, we find that:

Art. 7. In compliance with these Guidelines, **the pedagogical approach** of Early Childhood Education institutions **must ensure** that they fully fulfill their sociopolitical and pedagogical function:

V - building new forms of sociability and subjectivity committed to playfulness, democracy, planetary sustainability, and the **breaking of** age-based, socioeconomic, ethnic-racial, **gender**, regional, linguistic, and religious **domination relations** (Brasil, 2009, p.17, our emphasis).

In addition to the Guidelines, approved in the form of a Resolution and therefore in a more concise format, preceding and serving as a basis for them, the MEC approved the new *Parâmetros de Qualidade e Equidade para a Educação Infantil* in March 2024. In this document, we also find mention of gender in the following way, referring to the conditions under which pedagogical proposals should be organized:

List actions to overcome practices, attitudes, and situations involving any form of discrimination (**gender**, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, language, culture, disability, territorial, regional, place of residence, and other affiliations) involving children, their families, and institutional professionals (Brasil, 2024, online, our emphasis).

In addition to the guidance and standardization documents for quality in ECE, the aforementioned data on violence against women and children confirm the importance of incorporating gender into everyday school life from Early Childhood Education onwards as a quality criterion for the services offered at this stage of basic education.

A child's education is shared between the school and the family (Monção, 2013). Discourses that assume the family educates and the school teaches, and that gender issues should be addressed only within the family environment, as advocated by conservative movements such as *Escola Sem Partido*, tend to restrict the teaching role and hinder the approach to the topic in Early Childhood Education.

Finally, it is essential to highlight that ECE institutions still seem ill-prepared to work with this topic, as according to research by Daniela Finco (2003, 2004, and 2010), it is common for teachers to have difficulty dealing with the preferences of girls and boys when these defy common sense, or what our society defines as being typically feminine or masculine.

The experience of girls and boys in early childhood education can be considered a contemporary rite of passage that prepares them for schooling, during which skills are developed. The meticulous process of feminization and masculinization of bodies, present in the control of feelings, bodily movement, and the development of skills and cognitive models of boys and girls, is related to the strength of the expectations held by our society and culture. This process is reflected in the types of toys they are permitted and provided with: so that children “learn,” in a very pleasurable and disguised way, to behave like “real” boys and girls. (Vianna and Finco, 2009, pp. 272-273).

According to Finco (2010), children transgress predetermined gender standards, which are anchored in the binary of feminine and masculine and guided by perceived biological differences between the sexes. The author highlights the importance of the debate on gender permeating Early Childhood Education, particularly in female teacher training, stating that schools must be prepared to meet these demands while respecting children’s rights.

Considerations

Research on gender and education (Finco 2003, 2004, and 2010; Vianna and Finco, 2009; Vianna and Unbehaun, 2016) confirms the resistance to addressing this issue in the school environment and highlights the importance of addressing these demands from Early Childhood Education onward, especially in teacher training. This approach is also considered a strategy to mitigate the high rates of violence against women, and especially against children.

An analysis of the proposals for Early Childhood Education contained in the BNCC (Brasil, 2017) reveals a linear conception of human development, based on competencies that will translate into the skills of future workers, according to market interests. Along these same lines, the analysis allows us to verify the document’s alignment with the needs expressed by multilateral organizations such as the UN and the World Bank.

The political option to silence gender issues prevents the topic from being included in the school environment while hindering education as a right for all children, without any type of discrimination, as advocated by current legislation. This positioning of the BNCC (Brasil, 2017) represents an obstacle to quality Early Childhood Education.

It is important to note that there is resistance to the attempt to silence gender issues. In this sense, we emphasize the importance of the struggle waged by teachers and various social movements to ensure that these demands are incorporated into public

policies, especially when related to education. We also emphasize that these issues must be integrated into teacher training as a means of ensuring that these demands are reflected in pedagogical practice, thereby helping to provide effective and quality services to all.

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