



The policy of Early Childhood Education in the countryside, waters, and forests: notes on family demands^{1,2}

*A retomada da política da Educação Infantil do campo, das águas e das florestas:
apontamentos para reflexões sobre as demandas das famílias*

*La política de educación de la primera infancia en zonas rurales:
reflexiones sobre las demandas de las familias*

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Abstract: The article aims to present and discuss aspects of family demands regarding access to early childhood education (nursery and preschool) in rural territories, as brought forth during the process of reinstating the agenda of Early Childhood Education for Rural, Riverine, and Forest Communities (EICAF). This discussion emerges from the collective and participatory development of the project “Quality Indicators for EICAF – IndiqueEICAF” (FAPESP PPPP 2023/10272-0). The initiative is carried out by the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) as part of the implementation of the National Parameters of Quality and Equity in Early Childhood Education (PNQEEI). Data were collected in workshops held across the Northeast, Southeast, South, and North regions of Brazil, involving various social actors from early childhood education, rural education, school administrators, teachers, and researchers. These workshops resulted in the production of MEC documents systematizing the proposals and debates that took place. The material was analyzed qualitatively, leading to the construction of two analytical axes to understand the continuities and challenges in addressing families' demands, which in turn influence discussions on the quality of EICAF. The consensuses emerging from these debates—translated and materialized into preliminary indicators—reaffirm and deepen the stance that educational provision must necessarily take place within the local territory, be responsive to the diversities of families and communities, and remain culturally grounded.

Keywords: Childhood Education; Daycare; Preschool; Family; Rural.

¹ Thanks to the São Paulo Research Foundation for funding the project. Process FAPESP 2023/10.272-0, São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP).

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Resumo: O artigo tem como objetivo apresentar e discutir aspectos da demanda das famílias sobre o atendimento em creche/pré-escola em territórios rurais, trazidos no processo de retomada da pauta da Educação Infantil do campo, das águas e das florestas (EICAF), por meio da construção coletiva e participativa do Projeto “Indicadores de Qualidade da EICAF – IndiqueEICAF” (FAPESP PPPP 2023/10272-0). O IndiqueEICAF é desenvolvido pelo Ministério da Educação (MEC), no âmbito da implementação dos Parâmetros Nacionais de Qualidade e Equidade de Educação Infantil (PNQEEI). Os dados foram levantados em Oficinas realizadas no Nordeste, Sudeste, Sul e Norte do país, com diferentes atores sociais da educação infantil, da educação do campo, gestoras/es, professoras/es e pesquisadoras/es. Elas produziram documentos do MEC, com sistematizações sobre as propostas e debates ocorridos. O material foi tratado qualitativamente, sendo construídos dois eixos analíticos para o entendimento das permanências e desafios do atendimento às demandas das famílias, que repercutem no debate sobre a qualidade da EICAF. Os consensos nas discussões, traduzidos e materializados em pré-indicadores, reafirmam e radicalizam as posições sobre o atendimento necessariamente no território, sensível às diversidades das famílias e comunidades, e enraizado culturalmente.

Palavras-chave: Educação Infantil; Creche; Pré-escola; Família; Rural.

Resumen: El artículo tiene como objetivo presentar y discutir aspectos de la demanda de las familias sobre la atención en guarderías infantiles/preescolares en territorios rurales, planteados en el proceso de retomada de la agenda de la Educación Infantil del campo, de las aguas y de los bosques (EICAF), mediante la construcción colectiva y participativa del Proyecto «Indicadores de Calidad de la EICAF – IndiqueEICAF» (FAPESP PPPP 2023/10272-0). El IndiqueEICAF es desarrollado por el Ministerio de Educación Brasileño (MEC), en el marco de la implementación de los Parámetros Nacionales de Calidad y Equidad de la Educación Infantil (PNQEEI). Los datos se recopilaron en talleres realizados en el noreste, sureste, sur y norte de Brasil, con diferentes actores sociales de la educación infantil, la educación rural, gestores/as, maestros/as e investigadores/as. Estos talleres dieron lugar a documentos del MEC, con sistematizaciones sobre las propuestas y los debates desarrollados. El material se trató de forma cualitativa, construyendo dos ejes analíticos para comprender las permanencias y los retos de la atención a las demandas de las familias, que repercuten en el debate sobre la calidad de la EICAF. Los consensos en las discusiones, traducidos y materializados en preindicadores, reafirman y radicalizan las posiciones sobre la atención necesariamente en el territorio, sensible a las diversidades de las familias y comunidades, y arraigada culturalmente.

Palabras clave: Educación Infantil; Guardería infantil; Preescolar; Familia; Rural.

Received on: July 18, 2025

Accepted on: October 02, 2025

Introduction

The national policy for Early Childhood Education in the Countryside, Waters, and Forests (EICAF) is recent in our country and dates back to the early 2000s on the government agenda. Although the concern with this stage of Basic Education (BE) was already present in the movement of the so-called Rural Education (RE) and was made positive by the mention of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in the Guidelines that



instituted this modality in education (Brazil, 2002), it was only after 2008 that EICAF began to emerge as a field capable of mobilizing the interests of ECI's own policy.

As already discussed by Silva and Coelho (2023), that year, an inter-ministerial seminar was held at the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC). This was the start of a process aimed at tackling the silencing and fragmentation of policies for the education of children in rural areas. More than that, an important step was taken to integrate the issue into the political agenda that was being formed at that time in ECE and to commit it to overcoming the double process of invisibility of children from infancy living in rural areas, produced, among other things, also by the educational policies themselves, whether ECE or RE.

It can be said that, on the one hand, RE represented a social, political, pedagogical, and paradigmatic movement in the field of education, of enormous importance for rural populations and unparalleled in other countries. On the other hand, due to its origins, actors, and characteristics, it did not necessarily discuss or cover all the advances that ECE was making in its conceptions and in its consolidation movement in Education. Furthermore, from a critical perspective, it is possible to perceive that, although advances have occurred in the ECE and contributed to the construction of its identity, also due to its characteristics, actors, and origins, they have shown themselves to be linked and trapped in a hegemonic urban-centered conception.

It is important to point out that, in addition to what has already been presented by Silva and Coelho (2023), since 2008, this movement has been part of a commitment by the national ECE policy to specific groups and, above all, those most affected by the historical inequality in access to daycare and preschool in the country. It thus represents the incorporation, by the MEC bodies (albeit with contradictions and weaknesses), of the struggles raised, over many years, by social subjects, movements, collectives, and researchers involved in each of these issues. It was in this context that three major themes gained greater visibility in national EI documents: the internal age diversity of ECE, encouraging attention to babies; education for ethnic-racial relations; early childhood education *in and from* the countryside. As Rosemberg (2005) states, these inequalities do not follow a hierarchy and are generally overlapping.

Included in the agenda of the then General Coordination of Early Childhood Education of the Secretariat of Basic Education (COEDI/SEB/MEC), mobilizations were carried out to understand the reality of the conditions of supply and demand for ECE *in and from* the countryside through national research (Barbosa et al., 2012). Despite the tensions and challenges, public policy has opened up new avenues and has



even fostered ECE research groups, which have also started to look at children in rural areas, with an interest in debates about urban and rural, countryside and city. However, government actions were discontinued with the 2016 coup, being resumed in 2023, by the current General Coordination of Early Childhood Education (COGEI/SEB/MEC), in solidarity with the Board of Rural Education Policies and Environmental Education (DIPECEA/SECADI) (Silva; Coelho, 2023). The complexity of the EICAF implies multiple possibilities for approaching the study of its public policy. For the purposes of this article, we address aspects of the problem of families' demand for EICAF, understanding that it is an expression of the needs and desires of sharing, with the State, the collective education of its new members, but is also impacted by the absence or the ways in which it is implemented in their territories.

It is important to highlight that, since the beginning of the process of institutionalizing the national EICAF policy, the demands of families were presented as an issue to be uncovered. This is because at least two aspects play a strong role in its configuration, producing different effects when we compare its expression in urban environments and in rural areas: a) the inseparable origin of what we call today daycare/preschool from the process of economic and social changes caused by industrialization and, therefore, by urbanization; b) the separation and distancing of work and family activities that this new urban socio-spatial organization produced, unlike dynamics in rural and natural territories, where there is a unity of instances of production and reproduction of economic and sociocultural life. The fact that shared education/care institutions are, in their genesis, so linked to the structuring of city life, the consolidation of the bourgeois nuclear family, the reduction of community dynamics and the insertion of women into the world of work, can raise widespread questions, for the less attentive, about the adequacy of the provision of early childhood education in rural areas.

It was also this concern (but not only) that made, in the aforementioned national research (Barbosa et al., 2012), the demand of families appear as a central problem, incorporating a stage of listening to a sample of families from different regions of the country, to consolidate the understanding of the need or not to offer daycare in their territories. What we saw in the case of daycares, in general, was an expression of interest from families. However, this interest was always conditional on the quality of the daycare offered and on markers of child development. This highlighted both the care families took of their babies and the need for sharing, especially when women were involved in cooperatives and social movements. Those initial questions about the



adequacy of early childhood education provision in rural areas were therefore shown to be anchored in abstract conceptions of the rural, indicating the need, along with the rights of babies, to consider the different forms of life production in rural areas, in wetlands and forests.

In the case of preschool, the mandatory nature of enrollment introduces additional elements to the analysis of demand, and its mode of provision still requires investigation and critical examination in order to understand its effects in these territories. In general, national studies (Barbosa et al., 2012; Souza, 2021) indicate that, in order to comply with preschool legislation, the prevailing approach has been and continues to be one that prioritizes provision in urban areas and the policy of transporting children from rural areas, to the detriment of local rural offerings. Consequently, children bear, through their bodies and daily commutes, the costs of the lack of educational provision within their own territories. This absence has already been highlighted by Lima (2012) as one of the conditions for families, in the assessment process for continuing or leaving rural territories, to weigh up the availability of a place in their own location. Fears regarding school transportation, from the families' perspective, emerge as key factors influencing whether or not demand for early childhood education is expressed in rural territories.

The resumption of EICAF's national policy in 2023 comes at a new historical moment. Although there was, between 2016 and 2022, a major setback in the scope of its specific policy and educational policies in general, awareness of its interface with other spheres and actors of public policies had already been expanded in the area of ECE itself. This awareness emerged in the context of the review of the National Parameters of Quality and Equity in Early Childhood Education (PNQEEI), approved by the National Education Council (CNE) through the National Operational Guidelines for Quality and Equity in Early Childhood Education in 2024. The CNE's approval fundamentally transformed the nature, scope, and enforceability of its implementation by municipalities. Unlike earlier versions, which were issued solely as MEC documents, the new guidelines have been elevated to the status of a Resolution, thereby establishing a formal legal obligation for municipalities to implement and comply with them. Although the version of the Guidelines that was approved modified significant agreements made during the process of building the PNQEEI, its insert was kept in its entirety. These principles, partially incorporated into the approved Guidelines, converge insights from various fields of advocacy—such as special education, *quilombola* schooling, and education for ethnic-racial relations. They thereby



underscore that true quality in early childhood education depends on recognizing diverse childhoods and ensuring provision that is intrinsically connected to the territories and sociocultural communities that shape children's lives, identities, and sense of belonging.

The strategy employed by the MEC for the reinstatement of EICAF from 2023 onward involved mobilizing various social actors around the development of a national self-assessment document on the quality of early childhood education institutions serving rural, riverine, and forest communities. This initiative was thus embedded within the broader debate on the implementation of the PNQEEI. It has been developed through the project entitled "Quality Indicators for Early Childhood Education of Children from Rural, Riverine, and Forest Communities (IndiqueEICAF): Development and Mobilization of Political Actors." The project is conducted by the Secretariat of Basic Education (MEC/SEB/DPDI/COGEI) and the Secretariat of Continuing Education, Youth and Adult Literacy, Diversity, and Inclusion (MEC/SECADI/DIPECEA), in collaboration with FFCLRP/USP and with support from the FAPESP Public Policy Research Program (2023/10272-0, 2024–2026). The final version of the document can be used as a tool for institutional self-assessment by daycares and preschools. It is hoped that it will promote reflection on the issue within institutions and induce debate on the provision of the EICAF.

One of the questions that arises at this new stage is whether the full recognition of children's rights to EICAF from infancy—which has been partly shaped by the cultural construction of a conception that is increasingly gaining visibility within ECE in general—can be effectively established in the dialogues surrounding the reinstatement of EICAF policy. It also questions whether these intersections are sufficiently reflected in the ways various social actors understand and address families' demands. In this context, it is worth asking what old and new elements emerge when the demands of families from rural territories are brought into question within this policy still in the making. For RE, it is essential to note that, by definition, it must be rooted in the community and in the everyday practices of families living in rural, riverine, and forest territories. Its connection with the families' socioeconomic and cultural life is, therefore, intrinsic to this educational model, among other defining traits. In ECE, the complementarity between family and institution is also the foundation of the area and identity of this stage of BE.

The aim of this article is to present and discuss aspects of families' demands for daycare/preschool care in rural areas, brought up in the process of retaking the EICAF agenda, through the collective and participatory construction of IndiqueEICAF. Since



different social actors participate in this process, it is understood that it is, in itself, a space representative of the tensions, disagreements, and consensuses implied in the debate on the EICAF demand by families. Understanding how different actors and social groups interpret the constitution of EICAF, particularly in relation to families' demands, helps reveal the gaps in this policy and contributes to building a conception that is more closely aligned with the interests of the children themselves and with the identity and territorial belonging of their communities.

Methodology

The IndiqueEICAF project is based on a bottom-up methodology for the democratic creation of quality evaluation instruments, which proposes that they be drawn up through the involvement of various institutional players involved in the public policy, program, or instrument in question. From the point of view of research, "research subjects are considered co-producers of knowledge" (Streck, 2016, p.538). This methodology is also in line with national debates and consensus around the uses of assessment in ECE, always oriented towards the conditions of provision and rejecting assessments of children's individual performances as a guide for public policy. The model of the instrument to be built in IndiqueEICAF replicates the methodology of the National Indicators of Quality in Early Childhood Education (Brazil, 2008), based on a concept of negotiated and multidimensional quality (Bondioli, 2004).

In the IndiqueEICAF project, the final document — composed of a set of dimensions and quality indicators — will result from strategies for collecting and identifying pre-indicators, through the systematization of contributions from different actors who, from their respective standpoints, participate in the project as experts by experience. The stages of the IndiqueEICAF development process include: conducting workshops in the five regions of the country with different social actors; carrying out a bibliographic review of national production; holding a national consultation on the preliminary version of IndiqueEICAF; applying the preliminary version's pre-test in twenty-five institutions (five in each region of the country); systematizing and drafting the final version; and distributing and making the instrument available to all EICAF institutions.

For the purposes of this article, the materials produced in the Workshops are analyzed. The IndiqueEICAF Workshops took place from November 2024 to May 2025, sequentially across Brazil's Northeast, Southeast, South, and North regions, with the Central-West region (September 2025) dedicated to a critical reading of the document



produced in the earlier Workshops. The Workshops lasted between 5 and 8 hours, took place in person, and were attended by 254 people, an average of 60 at each Workshop. Participants included education managers; teachers working in rural, water, and forest schools; social movements of RE; movements and forums in defense of ECE; national and local entities linked to education; and researchers.

In the Workshops, participants were assigned to Discussion Groups (DGs), organized according to the quality dimensions of EICAF. Initially numbering ten, these dimensions underwent changes in both number and denomination, reaching seven dimensions in the Northern version, two of which were related to families: (1) Access and permanence: mobility of families, children from infancy, and promotion of health and food security (with 38 pre-indicators); (6) Relationship with family units, communities, social movements, and the child protection network from early childhood (with 26 pre-indicators). Following the discussions in the DGs, the contributions were presented and debated with all the participants in a Full Court session. Videotaped material and a report were produced with notes and a record of the discussions. After the Full Court sessions, a group of representatives of the participants was set up to consolidate the contributions and draw up or update the version of IndiqueEICAF. A significant *corpus* of documents was thus compiled for each region. This material, as part of a process promoted by SEB and SECADI in the construction of the IndiqueEICAF policy, constitutes the MEC documents that were treated and analyzed as institutional and public domain material. In any case, the Project was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences, and Letters of Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo (FFCLRP-USP).

The processing of the material focused on the debate raised by the different social actors on the subject of family demands for daycare/preschool care in rural areas. In this process, aspects brought up both in the debates and in the quality pre-indicators were analyzed, as well as the justifications and arguments⁵ for their inclusion in the EICAF self-assessment instrument. The research was therefore of a documentary, qualitative nature. According to Alves et al. (2021), document analysis is an important research method that allows us to understand, among other things, the perceptions of individuals and groups

⁵ We clarify that the statements of Workshop participants, which justified and/or supported the inclusion of EICAF quality pre-indicators, constituted the written material at this stage of the Project and will be presented in the manuscript as a documentary record, without any nominal or representative identification of the participants, but with reference to the region in which the record was produced.



regarding specific topics, taking into account elements of the historical and social context in which they were produced.

Based on the processing and organization of the material, the following data analysis axes were constructed and systematized: (1)There is no quality if the demand for daycare/preschool is not met within the territory itself; (2)There is no quality if the response to the demand is not sensitive to the specificities of families and communities.

Results and Discussion

There is no quality if the demand for daycare/preschool is not met in the territory itself

The material organized in the Workshops shows that discussions about possible EICAF quality indicators, when taken from the perspective of family rights, are still preceded by the struggle to guarantee access to places, inseparable from the struggle to ensure that the offer occurs in the territory itself. The insufficient provision of ECE places in rural areas, wetlands, and forests appears primarily as a matter of concern, especially regarding daycare, as noted by one of the Workshop participants: "Daycare is almost non-existent" (Documentary Record, Northeast Workshop). The movement of the participants is therefore to try to bring pre-indicators into the document that can help families and their communities to defend their demands.

At first glance, this approach seems to safeguard the right of children from infancy to be served in institutions located within their communities, in accordance with current regulations, such as the Child and Adolescent Statute (Brazil, 1990) and the guidelines of RE and ECE (Brazil, 2002, 2008, 2024). However, far beyond the legal aspect (which in itself is justified), the debates show that, for the participants, there is no possibility of quality education for these children when their rights and the demands of their families are not met in the locality. This issue thus touches upon the very definition of EICAF, which cannot exist outside the child's own territory, as highlighted by a participant: "EICAF must always be in the territory of the child and the family" (Documentary Record, Northeast Workshop). In this regard, several quality pre-indicators were proposed and supported for inclusion in a national self-assessment document, including: "The place is offered in a daycare/preschool located within the community and close to the child's home from infancy"; "The municipal administration prioritizes the construction or renovation of buildings to create places and provide early childhood education services in rural territories over offerings in the city."



In this context, the IndiqueEICAF document itself came to be seen by participants as an instrument that can influence the response to the demand for institutions in rural areas, wetlands, and forests, as justified by one of the Workshop participants: "It strengthens the struggle (against school closures) and the protection of the child, not taking (the child) to another region" (Documentary Record, Northeast Workshop). The document thus aligns with what was established in the PNQEEI through the National Operational Guidelines for Quality and Equity in Early Childhood Education (BRAZIL, 2024): "The provision of places and services for rural, riverine, and forest populations, Indigenous peoples, *quilombolas*, and other traditional peoples and communities must be carried out within their territories, avoiding centralization and, above all, out-of-area school transportation" (p. 22).

In the composition of this quality that can only be achieved when demand is met in the territory, tackling school closures and fighting school transportation also appear to be fundamental. According to Oliveira, Boff, and Basso (2024), school closures are a phenomenon that has been observed in Brazil since the 1990s. In the period from 2013 to 2023, based on analysis of the Basic Education School Census, considering all Basic Education, the authors identified a significant reduction in the number of schools; 18,960 schools were closed in rural areas, which represents a drop of 27%. Although it is noteworthy that 9,187 new units were opened in daycares, the authors found that the largest number of closures (8,777) was concentrated in preschools.

Social movements criticize this process and perceive it as a policy opposing RE (Santos & Carvalho, 2023; Molina, 2015). According to Lima, Santos, and Carvalho (2022), it is in this context that the issue of quality, when approached from a market perspective, operates in the dispute over the rural project, as it contributes to the closure of schools that do not meet predetermined standards and, "as yet another offensive of capital over the countryside (...) distances and detaches peasants from their place of residence, their culture, and their work" (Lima, Santos & Carvalho, 2022, p. 205). The negative consequences of school closures for communities are numerous and wide-ranging, encompassing social, political, and cultural issues, such as the erasure of the diversity and identity of their peoples (Lima, Santos, and Carvalho, 2022).

In the case of the EICAF, the discussions at one of the Workshops (Southeast) pointed out that the closure also has the particularity of strongly competing with the possibilities of life in rural territories at a time in the family cycle when new members are joining. The existence of the institution in the territory brings the dynamics of the school and families closer together, reducing distances - from a geographical and cultural point of view - which favors the strengthening of identity and community (Oliveira; Silva; Silva,



2023; Radrigán, 2023). In the Workshops, some of the pre-indicators proposed in this debate aimed to highlight the need for increased social oversight to maintain service provision. As examples, the following were proposed: "There is an explicit mechanism for hearing from Municipal Education Councils, families, community leaders, and social oversight bodies, such as the Public Prosecutor's Office, before closing places in daycare/preschool in rural, riverine, and forest territories"; "Measures are taken by school management to prevent the closure of daycare/preschool."

This inclusion of pre-indicators reaffirms the provisions of Law No. 12.960, of March 27, 2014 (Brazil, 2014), which amends the Education Guidelines and Bases Law - LDB (Brazil, 1996) and establishes the requirement for a statement from the normative body of the education system for the closure of rural, indigenous, and *quilombola* schools. Recognizing that the government has not been able to guarantee its effectiveness and that this legislation, however, has been insufficient, there is currently an initiative underway in the Senate, Bill No. 3091 of 2024, which details and makes this procedure more rigorous.

In ECE, the closure of schools, at the very least, silences the demand for daycare and creates huge obstacles for families to keep children aged 4 to 6 in preschool. In this case, funding for preschools in the locality is replaced by a policy that favors investment in transporting children to the city. The problems surrounding the transportation of young children are immense. Workshop participants mentioned some of these, ranging from physical strain and impacts on children's daily experiences to concerns related to the geographic and climatic conditions of each region, the types of transportation and their levels of comfort and safety, and the developmental characteristics of children that require specific care. School transport at the EICAF is only advocated in conditions of extreme necessity and only for travel from the house to schools located in the countryside, wetlands, and forests. One of the workshop participants said: "It's important to think about children's transportation, their challenges..." (Documentary record South Workshop).

In the Workshop held in the North, the regulation and oversight of transportation emerged as a key concern, considering the different modes that put children at risk, as highlighted by a participant who stated the need to: "Develop specific and local regulations for the provision of riverine and land school transportation, adapting to the reality of infants and children" (Documentary Record, North Workshop). The displacement of families also appears to be a conditioning factor in the demand for daycare/preschool in rural areas. At the North Workshop, a proposal for a quality pre-indicator was presented, questioning the bans on family transport in



school transport. It was noted that the difficult mobility of families in these areas, due to long distances, affects the possibilities for communication and everyday interaction between families and preschool in sharing the care and education of children.

There is no quality if the response to demand is not sensitive to the specificities of families and communities

In the IndiqueEICAF Workshops, debates around the ways of meeting the demand, related to its pedagogical dimension, appeared, from different perspectives, what could be called contextualization and territorial grounding, more or less aligned with the principles of RE. Those participants closest to the constructions of this modality inevitably recognize a facet that is very present in the characteristics of families in rural territories, in general, their links to social movements. This even prompted the argument for the need to include one of the quality dimensions of the IndiqueEICAF instrument in the title itself. It was discussed that this characteristic conditions a very specific mode of relationship between families and the daycare/preschool, due to its mediation by organized collectives. This recognition led to the following defenses emerging from the Workshop proposals: "We need to include social movements (in the discussion of the relationship between EICAF, families, and communities)" (Documentary record of the Southeast Workshop).

Gouvêa, Carvalho, and Silva (2021) highlight that the involvement of social movements, such as those advocating for land rights, intersects with school education and the human development fostered through participation in these movements, and consequently, with the pedagogy constructed *within* and *by* the movement. Vieira and Côco (2024) state that, at EICAF, the incorporation of the educational practices and experiences of social movements contributes to a service that is committed to the demands of rural subjects, their spaces, and their territorial, environmental, political, and social disputes. Similarly, for the participants, recognizing that family participation in social movements shapes their experiences and constitutes them in a distinct way requires valuing this process as necessarily defining and qualifying the provision of services.

In addition to this character, other specificities are present in the configuration of the families of these territories, resulting from the multiple ways of producing the material and symbolic life of their groups and their relationship with nature. In Brazil, the regulation for public policy purposes defines, through Decree No. 8.750 of May 9, 2016 (Brasil, 2016), twenty-eight legally recognized traditional peoples or communities. Traditional peoples and communities are "culturally differentiated groups that recognize themselves as such, that



have their own forms of social organization, that occupy and use territories and natural resources as a condition for their cultural, social, religious, ancestral, and economic reproduction, utilizing knowledge, innovations, and practices generated and transmitted through tradition" (Brazil, 2007, p. 1).

In addition, daycares and preschools can be located in differentiated areas - indigenous land, settlement areas, *quilombo* communities, or traditional peoples and communities (INEP, 2023) - or undifferentiated areas, making up complexes of diversity. The debates raised in the Workshops, across all regions and reinforced in the Northern Workshop, highlighted this condition of families, peoples, and communities, advocating that the indicators encompass ethnic-racial, gender, religious, migration, and nationality affiliations (considering families in border areas, refugees, and/or foreigners), among others, which together constitute the broad spectrum of living conditions and cultures.

The existence of pre-indicators that highlight and recognize the diversity of traditional peoples and communities, according to the participants, welcomes families in a scenario of devaluation of their knowledge, wisdom, and ways of life. Scientific research has indicated that ECE institutions not only fail to understand the realities of children and the life dynamics of their families, but also disregard them, contributing to the emergence and/or persistence of prejudices regarding children and their families, as well as to decontextualized practices that are generalist and/or urban-centric (Lima, 2012; Lima & Silva, 2015a, 2015b; Silva & Luz, 2019).

Likewise, the participants understand that, since the identities of families and children are multiple, as well as their connections with the land/water/forest and with EICAF institutions, it is the responsibility of daycare and preschool centers to structure forms and conditions of provision that are attentive to and in harmony with these diversities, which is why this formulation also appears as a pre-indicator. The search for quality in close contact with families, communities, and social movements requires a comprehensive approach, given the wide range of possible locations and characteristics of institutions and families in rural areas. One of the participants argues: "It is never a homogeneous thing; these are relationships with communities, with families in the plural" (Documentary record of the Southeast Workshop).

Guaranteeing a place in the territory, in itself, does not fully meet the right to collective education for children from infancy in these territories. It is the provision of services to meet the demand in a territorially and socio-culturally grounded manner that defines part of the conditions for quality provision; it shapes the actions of daycare and preschool centers in alignment with families and communities, and therefore remains open



to the construction of positive meanings by families regarding EICAF itself. For the participants, this movement can contribute to strengthening the relationships between EICAF, families, and communities, enhance the quality of services provided to children from infancy, and also influence the expression of families' demand for places.

The demand for daycare/preschool is therefore completely intertwined with the pedagogical conditions in which children are cared for from the time they are babies. One participant in the Southeast Workshop said, "Depending on what is offered, we don't want an Early Childhood Education institution for our *quilombola* children", making explicit the intrinsic relationship between demand and quality at EICAF. On the other hand, the provision of quality care can encourage families to demand Early Childhood Education. In this regard, the Workshops highlighted the importance of a dialogical perspective with families, aimed at understanding the meanings they attribute to ECE. In the case of rural areas, wetlands, and forests, there is the specific condition of being constrained by the scarcity of experiences and, consequently, references to EICAF in their territories, due to the predominance of insufficient or nonexistent provision; as noted by a participant in the Southeast Workshop: "The daycare did not exist, families had no reference, and this influenced their ability to express demand" (Documentary Record, Southeast Workshop).

According to the participants, this dialog must go through a mechanism established by the management, which can therefore also be verified by pre-indicators that indicate quality. In the Southeast Workshop, the following was suggested as a pre-indicator: "The municipal administration carries out a periodic study and listens to the community to find out about the demand for daycare/pre-school in the rural, wet, and forest areas of the municipality." Such actions can contribute to tackling what is called hidden demand, a problem that interferes with statistical surveys on demand in rural areas, creating distortions in the expression of families' demands for care.

Final Considerations

The material developed and analyzed shows that the revival of the national EICAF policy through the strategy of constructing quality indicators, using a participatory methodology, has made it possible to bring different social actors into dialogue, providing contributions to advance the understanding of families' demands regarding EICAF provision. In this process, a set of concerns has been mobilized regarding aspects that persist and hinder the realization of the educational rights of children from infancy, as well



as the expectations of families in rural, riverine, and forest areas, in the sharing of collective care/education practices for their new members. A look at this process has revealed voices that are in agreement with the defense of EICAF services in line with the demands and characteristics of the communities.

The analysis of the empirical material indicated that elements present since the early days of the constitution of the national EICAF policy are intertwined with new issues at the current juncture. Now, with the experience of a strong setback in this policy and in Education policies in general, the process of building IndiqueEICAF has raised awareness of its tensions and institutional weaknesses. In this regard, it is conceived as an instrument that can potentially contribute to the visibility of the demands of families in rural areas and their struggles, provided it is appropriated by social actors. Hence the concern of the participants to build indicators in this direction. At the same time, these proposals are now also benefiting from experiences of opening up ECE to incorporate the broader debate on its intersections with the educational modalities of RE, *quilombola* school education, and the education of other traditional peoples and communities. The diversity of childhoods and the concrete demands of their families are embraced more explicitly.

From the analysis of the documents generated in the IndiqueEICAF Workshops, it emerges that various social actors, by examining aspects of families' demand for daycare/preschool services in rural areas, report that the definition of EICAF itself is set in motion and further elaborated. The participants strongly assert that EICAF can only be constituted through the provision of services that address families' demands in a socio-culturally and territorially grounded manner, which includes offering services within the local community and pedagogical sensitivity to the political, social, economic, ethnic-racial, nature-related, and cultural dimensions of children's life experiences.

Assuming the reference of a territorially grounded EICAF entails recognizing that the persistent violations of rights, caused by meeting demand through the closure of daycare/preschool centers and the forced relocation of children to urban institutions—disregarding the identities and belongings of children from infancy—require the necessary incorporation of critique into the very construction of EICAF. Thus, it would be necessary to include, in its definitions, the critical dimension or, at minimum, to add the qualifier, designating it as “critical” EICAF, until this conception is fully understood and assimilated by institutions, education systems, education professionals, social actors, and researchers.

This call can help contextualize EICAF itself within the complex, conflictual, and



tense relations surrounding rural, riverine, and forest areas in Brazil, which shape the material and symbolic conditions of children from infancy living in these territories, as well as their families and demands for education. Without this, the very expression of demand will continue to be constrained by the scarcity of public policies and by references to ECE that are not organically connected to the realities of their lives and, on the contrary, compete with their modes of (re)existence, thereby subjecting their youngest members to violent pedagogical and subjective processes (Silva & Barbosa, 2023). Without this confrontation, there is no quality, and the production of inequality and undemocratic early childhood education will continue.

We hope that the reflections presented here will serve as amplifiers for the voices of social subjects who fight for the quality of daycares and preschools in rural areas and will serve as a warning and a call to action in the contemporary debate on the relationship between Early Childhood Education, families and communities in rural areas, strengthening and expanding the process of resuming EICAF's public policies.

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