Participatory Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education: A Documentary Analysis of Pedagogical Proposals from Portugal, Italy, and the City of São Paulo, Brazil

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Abstract

This study is based on the right of the child to participation and aimed to conduct a comparative analysis of documents, curricula, and/or pedagogical proposals developed in three places that seek to act by participatory pedagogies in early childhood, namely: Reggio Emilia approach, Italy; early childhood education centers in Portugal and in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. Given the analysis carried out, it was possible to identify similarities between the three proposals and evident influences of the pedagogies proposed in the Italian and Portuguese contexts for the construction of the early childhood education curriculum in the city of São Paulo, especially regarding the issues that address the participation of children in the contexts of early childhood institutions.

Keywords: Participatory Pedagogies; Early Childhood Education; Curriculum.

1. Introduction

Focused on the construction of an education that promotes social transformation, we analyzed pedagogical proposals that consider early childhood education from a participatory perspective. From this premise, we rely on the term participatory pedagogies (Oliveira-Formosinho, Kishimoto, and Pinazza, 2007) to refer to practices that seek to counteract a society marked by silence, inequality, and authoritarianism, inserting children as participants in the planning and decision-making processes of early childhood education institutions. Participatory pedagogy is understood as the one that involves everyone, including children, in decision-making processes, carrying out pedagogical action in a dialogued and shared way between adults and children.

Canavieira (2017, p. 66) discusses in her research that participatory pedagogies are part of what she defines as: childhood pedagogies, which consist of an educational praxis that considers children as subjects of rights and defines it as an "educational field that integrates actions, theories, and beliefs with a focus on young children as protagonists of their own educational process" (free translation). Participatory pedagogies emphasize the importance of listening to children as a means of promoting their participation. In early childhood education, participatory pedagogy considers that "structure, resources, and interactions should be planned to offer multiple possibilities, so that the child's voice has a real impact on the results of pedagogical learning" (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2007, p. 26, free translation).

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Freire (1992), when addressing the participation of students, their families, and the educational community, defends their engagement in creating public policies and educational practices that include people as active citizens in processes historically dominated by experts, teachers, and managers. Freire (1992) debate on student participation raises questions about decision-making practices that exclude young people and children, either in relation to school content or practices. A truly democratic participation requires that decisions be made considering all dimensions of the educational process. From this perspective, we identified some pedagogical proposals for early childhood education that can be characterized as participatory; however, for the analysis of this research, we chose two approaches that have been repeatedly studied in Brazilian research: the Reggio Emilia approach in Italy and the Pedagogy-in-Participation developed in some education centers in Portugal. We can state, considering the guiding documents (Reggio Emilia, 2019; Oliveira-Formosinho; Formosinho, 2001), that these pedagogical proposals are based on the idea of listening and participation of children and on the construction of a curriculum that emerges from everyday life.

Considering the Brazilian context, for this research, we chose the curriculum for early childhood education of the municipality of São Paulo, Brazil, which is published in a document entitled *Currículo da Cidade* (Curriculum of the City; São Paulo, 2019) and which was developed from a proposal that established as one of its guidelines the participation of children in early childhood education. Considering the large proportions of the Brazilian reality, the option to include the analysis of the proposal developed in the municipality of São Paulo seeks to contribute to reflections on the inclusion of children in the processes of participation in early childhood education, and the city of São Paulo is the one with the largest network of kindergartens and preschools in Brazil.

The study presented here is based on a qualitative approach and has documentary analysis and bibliographic research as data collection instruments. For the choice of these documents, we selected those that have a guiding character of the pedagogical proposals of the three sites selected for the research (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2013; Reggio Emilia, 2009; São Paulo, 2019).

The methodology consisted of an analysis of the three documents from a reading that sought to identify the elements that evidence the insertion of participatory proposals that consider children; excerpts representing guidelines for the inclusion of children in participatory processes were able to help in the analysis and comparison between the documents. For this analysis, we used the following criteria:

- Elements that evidence the listening of children from speech, observations of children's behaviors, and their productions;
- Concepts of participation that include children's views;
- Concepts that place children as subjects of rights capable of actively participating in the processes that include them.

2. The participatory process of children and historical invisibility

The process of understanding children as subjects of rights who can participate, give an opinion, and decide on issues that affect them is relatively recent in our society, given that historically children have been excluded from these processes.

Children, from a very young age, have the right to take their place as subjects of society capable of expressing themselves and participating in the decisions that affect them; nevertheless, this history of disregard for children still currently affects the way they are treated in early childhood education spaces when they are silenced to prioritize adult needs.

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The exclusion of children's needs and manifestations in early childhood education institutions reflect the concepts of children and childhood that adults have. Malaguzzi (1999) argues that children need to be considered as subjects and have space for participation in educational spaces from a sharing exercise between adults and children.

The process of children's participation necessarily goes through the listening of children; however, this is a challenge when it comes to very young children who do not yet verbalize like adults. This process of invisibility refers to the hierarchy that society, over time, has accepted as a form of organization, placing the age issue as one of the ways to attribute more or less importance to human beings. In the study by Rosemberg and Mariano (2010) about the Convention on the Rights of Children, there is emphasis on the place occupied by children in public policies and in the educational sphere and, from an analysis of the historical process of society, the authors point out that, in the contemporary West, there is a social construction that hierarchizes ages, positioning adults at the top of this hierarchy.

In this context, practices that seek to break with this logic and place children as subjects, with a guaranteed right to participation, end up being exceptional and serving as inspiration for those who wish to exercise democratic actions with children in institutions.

3. Listening, pedagogical documentation, and participatory practices in the documents analyzed

Considering the logic of guaranteeing the process of participation of children, we highlight the importance of creating pedagogical proposals of early childhood education institutions from the logic of participatory pedagogies, since the guarantee of children's participation goes against the process of invisibility of these subjects. As a way to contribute and reaffirm this relevance, we conducted the analysis of pedagogical proposals that seek a path of democratic practices (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2013; Reggio Emilia, 2009; São Paulo, 2019).

In the analysis of these documents, the first concept analyzed was that of listening; understanding that listening to babies and young children requires a process that goes beyond voices, also including gestures, expressions, emotions, and interactions. It was possible to identify that the listening of children is present in the three proposals, as an inseparable process of the exercise of children's participation.

The concept of listening presented here and considered in the analysis considers it essential to consider the thoughts, hypotheses, the characteristics of children, and the processes involved in working with childhoods, in a logic that opposes the relations of domination arising from the interactions between different age groups. This is an issue that, considering the research process focused on listening to children, began in the scientific field in northern hemisphere, and has gained followers in recent years (Rosemberg; Mariano, 2010), especially from the perspective of social studies of childhood, which emphasizes a new vision about children and a new role in academic research and in the pedagogical methods of institutions.

In the three documents analyzed, listening is presented as a premise for the participatory process. In the case of Reggio Emilia's approach, listening is considered "a permanent process that feeds reflection, acceptance, and openness towards oneself and towards others, being an indispensable condition for dialogue and change" (Reggio Emilia, 2009, p. 11, free translation). Listening, in this case, is a continuous process that feeds the educational practice, being encouraged from the exercise of dialogue, that is, it is not configured as a passive listening of the teacher, but a process of comings and goings from what was heard, so that dialogue and exchange occur.

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In Pedagogy-in-Participation, the concept of listening appears as a responsibility of the teacher who needs to "listen to children to understand and answer them" (Oliveira- Formosinho, 2013, p. 9, free translation); this perspective of response that places listening as the responsibility of adults leads to understand that the dialogue is guided exclusively by the child's need with its sole purpose being to understand them; nevertheless, the document includes the need to expand the cultural repertoire of children by defining that, in addition to listening and responding to children, the educator must "extend the knowledge of the child and the group towards culture. Learning develops in cultural encounters between children and adults" (Oliveira- Formosinho, 2013, p. 13, free translation).

In the guiding document of the municipality of São Paulo, there is no specific definition of the concept of listening, although it is present in several passages, as a fundamental element of this proposal. The *Currículo da Cidade* (São Paulo, 2019) is organized in such a way as to emphasize the ways in which children can be heard in educational units (EU). According to the guidance, "we listen to babies and children when we observe them, when we record what we learn from them and about them, that is, we listen when we seek to understand their particularities […] we listen when we welcome their initiatives and respect their feelings" (São Paulo, p. 74, free translation). In all three approaches, listening is presented as an action that must occur continuously throughout the educational process carried out in early childhood institutions.

Another important evidence identified in the analysis was regarding pedagogical documentation, a concept that is directly linked to the process of listening to children and, consequently, participation, since it allows the exercise of recording what children say and do so that they serve as reflection and study to adults and can be used as a basis for the planning that underlies the adult's action. The pedagogical documentation in Reggio Emilia's approach is understood as an essential and structuring part of its educational theory by valuing the subjective and group learning processes of children and adults, which are identified by observation (Reggio Emilia, 2009). However, the pedagogical documentation, from this perspective, receives meaning by the process of revisiting, resignifying, and interpreting from various points of view (Reggio Emilia, 2009).

In the case of Pedagogy-in-Participation, the pedagogical documentation is conceptualized as "the process to record learning—the learning of children, but also the learning of professionals and parents" (Oliveira-Formosinho, p. 33, free translation). In this pedagogical proposal, pedagogical documentation is considered a way of interpreting and signifying the pedagogical everyday life from the process of participation of children, so that planning is done with them and not for them.

In the *Currículo da Cidade* (São Paulo, 2019), the concept of pedagogical documentation is conceptualized from the perspective of Loris Malaguzzi, considering the aspects of listening and participation of children. A point of convergence with the other proposals is that pedagogical documentation promotes the process of communication and participation with the entire educational community.

This document focuses on the practical aspects of pedagogical documentation that are illustrated from "scenes" of the daily life of educational institutions, defining that it is from observation that all movements and planning are elaborated, and these observations are accompanied by the exercise of pedagogical documentation. This is a way found for guaranteeing the exercise of listening and participation of children.

Both the concept of listening and pedagogical documentation present in the three pedagogical proposals converge to the exercise of children's participation; the idea of listening focuses on daily life and concepts

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about children and childhoods, and pedagogical documentation, when dealing with the practical aspect, shows how it is possible to exercise this listening so that it is characterized as participation.

4. Final Remarks

The pedagogical proposals of Reggio Emilia and from Portugal present similarities in the concepts of listening and include dialogue with adults as an essential part of this practice. In the proposal of the city of São Paulo, when dealing specifically with listening, the document disregards the relationship of dialogue, explicit in the other proposals; it ends up emphasizing the listening of children by adults, but does not explain the need for adult considerations in promoting a dialogue.

In the three proposals, pedagogical documentation appears as an important listening instrument that entails a participatory process by giving visibility to the children's perspectives, which serve as the basis for pedagogical planning. The sharing of pedagogical documentation as a way to consider the different points of view to make interpretations of the children's knowledge is evidenced in the three documents. Other elements that promote the participation of children were highlighted in the three documents, namely: the organization of spaces, work with projects, and some guidelines on the management process of institutions that are oriented to be carried out in a democratic manner.

These elements constitute a relevant contribution to guide practices that seek to strengthen the exercise of children's participation, and the pedagogical proposals analyzed from the three countries show several similarities. It is important to highlight that such issues are based on democratic conceptions of education and the idea of powerful children who are subjects of rights.

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