

## CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND PUBLIC POLITICS IN BRAZIL: VIEWS AND REFLECTIONS

### *EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS NO BRASIL: VISÕES E REFLEXÕES*

### *EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL Y POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS EN BRASIL: VISIONES Y REFLEXIONES*

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**ABSTRACT:** The contemporary society has been through a vast number of changes that affect childhood education in the whole world, especially in Brazil. The absence of public politics that includes the education of children between zero and seven years, has been incipient. Currently, we are facing serious social problems and there is a necessity of reviewing those politics in order to avoid going against democracy, offering low quality education to the less fortunate layers of society. Therefore, the present article is not the result of a research but has its goal based on concept of politics to analyze historically the course of childhood education in Brazil, taking in consideration its challenges, and reflect which are the possible changes to be considered for the next decade.

**KEYWORDS:** Public policies. Childhood education. Reflections. Context. Qualities.

**RESUMO:** *A sociedade contemporânea tem passado por inúmeras transformações que afetaram a educação infantil em todo o mundo e, de modo especial, no Brasil. A ausência de políticas públicas que contemplem a educação das crianças entre zero e seis anos de idade, tem sido incipiente. Neste momento, enfrentamos sérios problemas sociais, há necessidade urgente de revermos tais políticas, para não irmos na contramão da democracia, continuando a oferecer uma educação de baixa qualidade para as camadas desprivilegiadas da população. Portanto, o presente artigo não é o resultado de uma pesquisa, mas tem como objetivo a partir do conceito de políticas, analisar historicamente o percurso os desafios da educação infantil no Brasil e refletir quais as possibilidades de mudanças a serem consideradas para a próxima década.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Políticas públicas. Educação infantil. Reflexões. Contexto. Qualidade.*

**RESUMEN:** *La sociedad contemporánea ha pasado por inúmeros cambios que han afectado a la educación infantil en todas las partes del mundo incluso en Brasil. La ausencia de políticas públicas que atiendan niños y niñas entre cero y seis años de edad son incipientes todavía. En este momento enfrentamos serios problemas sociales, y hay necesidad de una revisión de las*

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*políticas para no ir en otra dirección diferente de la democracia, ofreciendo una educación de mala calidad para la población más desfavorecida. El presente artículo no resulta de una investigación, pero tiene como objetivo, partiendo del concepto de políticas, analizar históricamente el camino de la educación en Brasil y sus problemas y reflexionar acerca de las posibilidades de cambios para mejorar en las próximas décadas la educación infantil.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Políticas públicas. Educación infantil. Reflexiones. Contexto. Calidad.

## Discussing the concept of politics

The concept of politics has several interpretations. According to Severino (s/d), the concept of politics is rich, complex and ambiguous, however, it is based on the power relationship that is established between men. Etymologically<sup>2</sup>, the word is of Greek origin, polis, which means city and it was linked to a hierarchical organization of society in social segments, so that only citizens had rights. It is known that in ancient Greece, especially in Athens, only aristocrats and free men were considered citizens, and therefore participants in political life, with no rights for women, children and slaves.

Therefore, according to Severino (s/d), the word politics can have at least three meanings. It can be considered as a set of objectives that inform a government's program of action and that is capable of guiding and conditioning its execution. It is justified by the proposed purposes. The idea of politics is also associated with the action program itself, regardless of its coherence, legitimacy or justification.

Finally, from an ideological<sup>3</sup> point of view, it permeates the social relations of power, therefore it involves the philosophical principles adopted, generally, by the group that assumes power. Therefore, when it comes to educational policy, it moves through the three universes, because it translates into a set of subjective objectives, legitimized by an ideological discourse, which refers to an action program and its eventual execution. In this sense, the political act is an educational act, because it has founded and put into practice through an ideological discourse.

Therefore, educational policies are constituted by a discourse that aggregates personal and social relations, legal norms, the organization of institutions, administrative measures, theoretical formulations and, even, pedagogical practices. They are intrinsically associated with culture. However, there is a reality that can be seen in the history of childhood in different

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<sup>2</sup> Etymology is the science that studies the origin of words.

<sup>3</sup> Ideology is a set of concepts and values configured collectively, capable of translating particular interests into a universalized language.

countries, including Brazil, that the dependence of the child on the adult was a characteristic that was present, in some way, among the different social classes, within companies with different types of organization.

In Brazil, from a historical point of view, the civilizing political project left no room for the creation of an educational policy suited to the country's needs. Education has never been the object of systematic and responsible planning, since the colonial period some measures have been adopted that did not interfere in the colonialist policies chosen by the Portuguese and later, only contemplated the most favored social classes leaving the other layers of the population left to their own luck. In the case of children, this was worse, given they great devaluation.

It does not mean that there were no public policies aimed at the little ones, but they were silent in relation to education, especially pre-school.

Consequently, regardless of the political and economic moment, the relationship between public policies and early childhood education fluctuated greatly according to the pressure of social classes, with the concept of child and the concept of childhood.

Such economic significance of childhood underlies the value attributed to the child in the various domains of social reality. The child does not, therefore, have a unique value, and there is no universally ideal form of relationship between child and adult. Treating the child in the abstract, without considering the different living conditions, is to hide the social significance of childhood (KRAMER; 1992, p. 23, our translation).

### **Brazilian childhood: a bit of history**

It was seen earlier that the value attributed to the child varies according to the context in which they are inserted, in such a way that they are not an abstract or a-historical being, but a concrete subject whose development depends on their conditions of life, social class and cultural environment and family.

Therefore, public policies for early childhood education cannot be understood if we do not consider the children's life contexts and the socio, economic and political factors that contributed to this.

With this perspective, the history of the child in Brazil, can be described from the discovery and the colonization process, officially started in 1500 (15th century), since it is directly associated with the civilizing process.

The Portuguese influence on education was great, however, there are few records of the lives of the little ones, not least because the dependence of the child on the adult was a common process in Europe at the time of the discovery. What is known of this reality comes from the

work of historians who sought to collect data, through some documentation, evidence that showed how they lived. In the context of the great discoveries and, in the case of Brazil, however, some questions must be considered.

Firstly, the existence of an indigenous population that lived here and had their own customs in relation to the little ones and that sometimes varied from one group to another, both with regard to the activities performed by boys and girls, as well as the age groups.

Secondly, due to the presence of black people who came as slaves, who were often imprisoned and even kidnapped by true gangs that worked with the slave market. Children and young people came in an inhumane situation, in which the little ones were usually separated from adults, their parents or their family, and sold in slave markets.

Finally, because in Portugal, as in all of Europe at that time, children were not valued for dying early, which justifies the few representations about them. The rare records come from art, suffering a great influence from the Catholic Church, as shown by the studies of Ariès (1981). Among the nobility, for example, children were educated, depending on adults and in their image. In the less favored classes, the treatment was no different, however, they were forced to engage in profitable financial activities and were often given, sold, prostituted or abandoned due to their social class.

Ramos (1999), in an interesting article entitled *A história trágico-marítima das crianças nas embarcações portuguesas no século XVI* (The tragic-maritime history of children on Portuguese vessels in the 16th century), showed how they were treated during the trips at that time, because in the Portuguese lands only children belonging to the nobility had their childhood.

The caravels that came here were commanded by adventurers who aimed at a quick enrichment to return to the Metropolis and, they demanded labor. It was difficult to get people to work on the boats, as the services were exhaustive, they were not paid and, on the trips, it was not certain of the return. For this, the king's orphans<sup>4</sup> were recruited, children without a family and sometimes even with parents, who, given the situation of poverty, sold their children in exchange for some money. Thus, they began to embark on the caravels where they performed the function of cabin boys<sup>5</sup> or pageboys<sup>6</sup>. Many orphans came with the function of marrying

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<sup>4</sup> Orphans of the king was the name given to abandoned children in Portugal and who were kept by the crown.

<sup>5</sup> Cabin boys were children and adolescents who, from the point of view of the navy, had inferior functions to sailors.

<sup>6</sup> Pageboys were children or young people who served an adventurer, such as chambermaids or personal helpers.

the subjects of the Crown. On the way, however, they ended up tolerating acts of sodomy, pederasty and pedophilia, in addition to performing the worst tasks.

In attacks by pirates they were enslaved, prostituted and, at times, exhausted to death. They were considered as animals and their workforce was used while they lasted.

Regarding indigenous children, too, little is known before the Portuguese came to Brazil. However, the records found show that they participated in their parents' daily lives. When small, boys and girls stayed with their mothers and after a certain age, the former followed the activities of their parents in the forest, hunting and fishing, while the latter learned domestic chores and planting. Initiation rites were common in the transition from childhood to adolescence, as boys should prove that they would be good warriors.

Now, if in Europe, at that time, children were devalued for the short time they lived, in Brazil the situation was no different. Therefore, since 1549, education in the country has been in the hands of the Jesuits, the only intellectual and spiritual mentors, considered delegates of the Portuguese government who implemented the European model of education, the French, for a colony where an exploitative and agrarian economy prevailed, which favored landlords, crown administrators and their children, leaving the rest of the population on the margins of the educational process. It was explicit that within that context there could not be any kind of public policy that included education and, even less, small children.

Later, although there was a constitution in the Empire, that of 1822, it made little progress in relation to education and, even less, in the perspective of childhood.

Education reflected the slave society, whose education was the privilege of a few, and, in that reality, childhood had no meaning. This model has been perpetuated for more than three centuries, with no public policies aimed at education and, even less, aimed at young children.

According to Kramer (1995), at that time little was done in Brazil during childhood, both from a legal point of view, as from other types of assistance.

### **The twentieth century and the rise of early childhood education**

The 20's of the last century, was marked by a series of social, political and economic transformations that had an impact on the families' life contexts and, consequently, on the education of young children.

This was not a quick and easy process, but was the product of a series of movements by hygienists, doctors and educators who, together with the social and economic changes undergone by Brazilian society, tried to preserve the lives of the little ones and ended up

contributing to improve the attendance system, favoring the care and education of children, in addition to looking at childhood from another perspective, which was already occurring in other parts of the world.

As education is directly linked to the economy, between the 20s and 30s there was a decline in coffee agriculture in Brazil, determined by land depletion and the lack of adequate agricultural techniques, aggravated by the imbalances in the price of the product on the international market.

The retraction that occurred during the crisis of 29 and 33 and later during World War II, always followed a more accentuated onslaught by the international capital. During the Getúlio Vargas administration, the penetration of this capital had to face serious restrictions. It was during this period that the State took on more actively the task of driving development, laying the foundations for the installation of heavy industry (ROMANELLI, 1982, p. 57, our translation).

This period was also characterized by the appearance of mass policies, which according to the author mentioned above, occurred due to the connection of the popular classes with political leaders, which was done by the charismatic aspect. It is in this mass that populism feeds itself, until it reaches economic nationalism, when the combination of economic interests is born between the proletariat, the middle class and the industrial bourgeoisie, which favored the expansion of the industrial sector and with it the movement for the emancipation of women, since many of them started working in companies.

From a social point of view, alongside the rural aristocracy, formed by large landowners and capitalists, a middle class emerged during this period, composed of professionals, traders and small industrialists, who started to demand education for their children, because with the expansion of salaried work and education was a factor of social ascension and for that, an extremely elitist education needed to be restructured, the defense of its democratization was being sought.

Although, since 1920, the first model of daycare centers appeared to support the workers' children, seeking to improve the children's hygienic and sanitary conditions, they were linked to the assistance service since they had no educational concerns.

The *escola novista movement* (New School Movement) led by Fernando de Azevedo and Anísio Teixeira emerged, which sought to transform the country's education according to the American model, influenced by the thinker John Dewey. Although the speeches of the Educators at Escola Nova (New School) did not refer to children between zero and six years of age, these speeches would later appear in defense of pre-school education.

It can also be said that until 1930, daycare centers were the result of moral and economic maladjustment, therefore, they could not be part of public education because they did not have educational objectives.

It is important to highlight that, at that time in Europe, French nursery schools had already been created, whose models were later adopted in Brazil, bringing a pleasant school vision, although in most of them, the practice of immobilization and tiresome exercise memorization, because the idea of the child persisted as an imperfect being and in need of moralization.

Movements were already beginning to appear, in Europe and the United States, on the recognition of pre-school education that, in some way, ended up influencing Brazil.

According to Didonet (2012), the policies adopted in our country have always reflected those existing in other countries, overlapping, most of the time, with the demands of national reality and local culture, especially in the case of children.

However, based on foreign models, early childhood schools emerged in Brazil in the 1930s, especially in São Paulo, based on the Froebelian principles of kindergartens and which, due to the quality of the work done, ended up having their places disputed by the children of the country's cultural and economic elite, such as, for example, the Caetano de Campos School.

It is noteworthy that, in 1935, in the State of São Paulo, the Children's Parks were created, designed by Mario de Andrade, for children over three years old, daughters of workers. They did not last for long because there was no defense by the government of principles that contemplated the culture of the little ones and their real needs so that they could develop properly.

There was no national conception of a policy in favor of children and, even less, the understanding of the child within a socio-political and economic context, from which the child and family were influenced. In a very timid way, early childhood education, in this period, was taking its first steps, but it was not addressed in the context of the structuring of teaching, which occurred only between 1942 and 1945.

The emergence of the National Department of Children was linked to the Ministry of Health and focused on the coordination of activities aimed at protecting motherhood, childhood and adolescence, addressing more the physical, hygiene and food aspects than concerned with the child's integral development. For a long time, care for the little ones was the responsibility of the Children's Department, run by doctors and hygienists, who were concerned with maintaining life and not with child development.

In the following ten years, several child-related events took place worldwide, from the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1958) to the creation of the United Nations Children's

Fund (UNICEF), linked to the United Nations (UN). In that same period, in 1953, the Committee of the World Organization for Pre-school Education (OMEP), linked to the private sector, appeared in Brazil, but at no time was it attempted to solve the problem of children, resulting from the division of social classes. Policies were adopted that did not contemplate the national context.

In the following decades, profound changes were made in the economic, political and social plan that reverberated in education with LDB 4024/61, it was based on liberal ideals, considering education as a right of all. However, it was silent about small children.

Kramer (1995), pointed out that in this period pre-school education was gradually accepted as a factor of socio-cultural liberation with the objective of implementing the principle of equal opportunities, which only came between about the 1980s and 1990s, the child's dependence on the adult would continue and last longer.

Although the legislation, at that time, expressed populist concerns, giving the State responsibility for education, proposing a free school network for all, the public authorities were unable to meet all demand, leaving education for children aside once more, because it was not mandatory, which ended up being taken over by private institutions, whether in the form of parks, or in the form of nursery schools, daycare centers, nurseries and many other ways.

Thus, also the legislation of 71, under full North American influence, little referred to the subject, as can be seen in the LDB (Law of Directives and Bases of Education) in one of its articles: "Article 19 § 2. The education systems will ensure that children under the age of seven receive convenient education in nursery schools, kindergartens and equivalent institutions" (LDB 5692/71, our translation).

At that time, the MEC/USAID Agreement was signed, which met more American impositions, in relation to Brazilian education, than national interests and needs.

It was a period of great stagnation in education, because under the aegis of democratization, the schooling process was open to all, without the State, as a public power, being able to assume it.

There was more demagogic decision making that avoided social conflicts than rules and procedures that met the needs of the population, especially the low income and the needs of young children, who ended up, once again, outside the legislation.

Although, in 1975, the Pre-School Education Coordination was created in the Ministry of Education and Culture, centralizing the activities developed by the State and Municipal Education Departments, in relation to the education of young children, the agency made progress in relation to the subject.



Programs based on American models were adopted, based on the principle, according to Kramer (1995), that children of the lower classes failed because they had socio-cultural disadvantages, therefore, through early intervention, it would be possible to reduce and even eliminate educational disadvantages.

### **The 90s and advances for childhood**

If, during more than four hundred years, we were influenced by the European educational paradigm, during the 1970s we adopted North American models, because considering the economic dependence on the United States, that country dictated the implementation of programs that met its interests and did not to the demands of Brazilian society.

In the late 1980s, early 1990s, a series of democratic governments emerged around the world, including Brazil. In the face of political, social and economic changes, several countries have enacted new constitutions. Such changes were accompanied by technological advances and the process of globalization or globalizaton that quickly spread across the planet.

The increase in female work outside the home also ended up requiring institutions to care for young children.

As in other nations, there were several movements in favor of children, whose ideas spread quickly, causing the appearance of a series of legal documents aimed at education, among them the 1996 Magna Carta, which for the first time in country's history, ended up referring to the little ones,

Art. 205. Education, **the right of all and the duty of the State and the family, will be promoted and encouraged with the collaboration of society**, aiming at the full development of the person, their preparation for the exercise of citizenship and their qualification for work.

Art. 208. The State's duty to education will be carried out through the guarantee of:

**I - compulsory and free basic education from 4 (four) to 17 (seventeen) years of age**, including its free offer for all those who did not have access to it at their own age; (Wording given by Constitutional Amendment No. 59, 2009) (See Constitutional Amendment No. 59, 2009)

**IV - early childhood education, in daycare and pre-school, for children up to 5 (five) years of age**; (Wording given by Constitutional Amendment No. 53, 2006). (BRASIL, 1996, authors' highlights, our translation)

There is no doubt that the Constitution was a major step in terms of the education of young children, but other international movements, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the demographic, economic, social and political changes that have occurred in the world, have contributed to the child became part of public policies.

In many places, early childhood education saw the way out of the challenges faced by the economy and society, and small children were beginning to be seen in a different way.

With the advances in studies on children, especially from the 90s, in Psychology, Sociology and Education, childhood started to be recognized. Children were no longer unhistorical beings, a debate arose to consider them subjects of rights that are built in relations with the world and with other subjects. It was a period in which, according to Didonet (2012), the sciences focused on children as an object of study, their manifestations and stages of development, which certainly interfered with the advancement of public policies.

It is certain that there are universal characteristics for the little ones that live around the world, but there are peculiarities that allow each child to be unique and singular and this is determined by their family and social contexts. The advances of the different sciences, added to changes in the population's ways of life and the new demands of families, also contributed to the creation of the Child and Adolescent Statute (ECA, Portuguese initials), which defined what children and adolescents were, within from a legal perspective, presenting the rights of each.

At that time, pressure from universities, educators and society, carried out through forums, congresses, conferences and other debates, spurred the emergence of new legal documents including among them the organization of early childhood education in the country.

Thus, in 1996, the Law of Directives and Bases 9394/96 emerged, in Chapter II it explained the following:

Art. 29. Early childhood education, the first stage of basic education, aims at the integral development of the child up to six years of age, in its physical, psychological, intellectual and social aspects, completing the action of the family and the community.

Art. 30. Early childhood education will be offered at:

I - daycare centers, or equivalent entities, for children up to three years of age;

II - pre-schools, for children from four to six years old.

Art. 31. In early childhood education, the evaluation will be done by monitoring and recording the child's development, without the objective of promotion, even for access to basic education (BRASIL, 1996, our translation).

The seeds of decades of debates about the child and the appreciation of childhood were beginning to germinate.

However, we must not forget that, especially in the last 30 years, due to the expansion of the industrialization process, changes were observed in the family and in the role of women, influencing the child's view, which is no longer seen now as the product of the internalization of social values, but it is an active agent and, as Corsaro (2011) showed, an avid apprentice.

Such changes associated with pre-existing movements, have produced advances in early childhood education, increasing the number of movements in favor of childhood.

From the official and legal point of view, it was seen from another perspective, that is, as a social category with rights and duties and a human being who has his own culture, who is not limited to reproducing adult culture, but who is capable to transform it in order to become an active subject within the group in which they live.

Then, new proposals emerged in the scope of governmental actions demonstrating, the principle of a process of valuing childhood and considering the child as a subject of rights.

Legal and official documents were prepared in order to guide the work in early childhood education, as was the case of the National Curriculum Reference for Early Childhood Education (1998) and the Curricular Guidelines for this level of education.

Also, early childhood education became part of the National Education Plan (2014), in Goal 1, demonstrating how much educators and civil society had to struggle to achieve such achievements.

Still, this does not mean, however, that these documents were perfect, but they were the first to adopt a new conception of childhood and the relevance of the child's role in society.

Although from the point of view of ideas, we have advanced in relation to legislation and guidelines in working with young children, practices are still far from being realized.

It should also be noted that in (2017), the National Common Curricular Base was created, a document that sought to structure schooling throughout the country, including young children. However, it was more concerned with the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes, than with children's learning and development.

In addition, the country has continental dimensions and the principles proclaimed in the document will not be able to be maintained and implemented equally in the face of different contexts, the scarcity of resources, infrastructure and materials, deviations of funds, the lack of adequate environments that respect the children and that allow their relationship, the precarious life situation of the vast majority of students who depend on the public school and their families, the poor training of professionals and, above all, political disinterest.

Management, in this sense, is a key element for offering early childhood education, however in the country we are very far from the ideal, either due to the disinterest of the central administration, or due to the archaic views of occasional managers, who still see the child as someone submissive to the adult.

However, we have made some progress and there is no denying the emergence of some public policies that have improved the situation of the little ones at the theoretical level, both in terms of the way of looking at children and of valuing their childhood, but it is very little. It is necessary that the practices also advance and that the rights proclaimed in the legislation are guaranteed.

It is known that education is not only a factor of change, but of transformation, because it “implies a search for a subject, the man” (FREIRE, 1982, p. 28, our translation) and, it must be the result of his education itself.

Unfortunately, we live in a pandemic moment in a society in which part of the government tends to imitate those of other countries, in a process of bondage, ceasing to be aware of their own existence and that of their country, which has stagnated educational policies, advancement recognition of childhood culture and freedom of expression, perpetuating adult authoritarianism over children's creativity.

### **Final reflections and other perspectives**

Although we have pointed out in the course of this article that public education policies existed, we saw that they did not contemplate childhood, showing that there is still much to be done in this area, from the social and educational point of view, because:

- social contexts are changing and, mainly, after the global pandemic caused by COVID 19, which has aggravated global poverty, offering less opportunities to vulnerable populations, putting minors at risk, either through technology, with websites, videos and others inadequate equipment, either personally with the increase in violence and sexual abuse, where children are the biggest victims, through the exploitation of child labor;

- public power increasingly turns to the neoliberal economy, under pressure from the national business community, making the gap between rich and poor even greater;

- there is a growth in political and economic measures that have favored the reduction and investment of the State as a public power in social and priority areas such as education, health and housing, preventing any progress;

- poor quality education is offered mainly in public and free institutions, especially when there is direct government interference in the sector that does not respect the peculiarities of different contexts, such as indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, immigrants, etc.;

- there is a discontinuity of action programs, which are altered due to changes in public policies;

- there is a decrease in the quality of early childhood education in the face of population demand, the lack of infrastructure and the unpreparedness of professionals in most schools;

- there is sometimes a diversion of funds for education and research, to other non-priority sectors, which end up preventing any and all advances, both in relation to childhood and in terms of the services provided to them.

Added to all these obstacles is the total devaluation of professionals, their disqualification, low wages and poor training.

This leads us to reflect on some questions:

Are these measures not purposeful preventing the formation of more reflective teachers and, consequently, of more critical and creative children?

If children become autonomous, wouldn't they start to claim their rights and participate in the society in which they live, not only knowing the culture, but contributing to its transformation?

The error is not in imitation, but in the adoption of models without proper analysis and adequacy.

In every man there is a creative impetus. The urge to create is born out of man's inconclusion. Education is more authentic the more it develops this ontological drive to create. Education must be disinhibiting and not restrictive. It is necessary to give opportunity for the students to be themselves (FREIRE, 1982, p. 32, our translation).

Now, within the current reality and impediments placed on the care of children, the appreciation of childhood should be rethought.

Which paths to take?

Searching for the right route is not an easy task, but at least there are some suggestions that could help to rethink, not only early childhood education, but schooling from a broader perspective.

First, it is necessary **to implement public policies that are clear, continuous and appropriate** to the contexts, that have at least the duration of one cycle, in the case of early childhood education 5 years.

Second, at the end of this period **they are evaluated**, not by the product, but by the process to which the groups were submitted, **valuing the research**.

Third, **rethink the spaces** for the care of the little ones, which **should be cheerful and stimulating**.

Fourth, **that children be allowed to act with autonomy, creativity and the right to express themselves through their multiple languages**.

Fifth, to **invest in a process of valuing professionals and in parallel formation**, relating theory to practice, divesting themselves of academicism.

Finally, seek to **establish continuous relationships between public policies, managers, professionals, children and families, respecting different contexts**.

Only in this way will we be able to build a more supportive, more developed and fairer country.

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