

The quality of Fortaleza's state-aided private childcare centers under focus¹

A qualidade das creches conveniadas de Fortaleza em foco

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the quality of the education offered by the 94 state-aided private childcare centers in Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil. During the initial stage of this research, general data has been gathered concerning the operating conditions (physical infrastructure, toys, professional training, etc.) of 54 facilities. Subsequently, the scope has been narrowed to only 16 of them, seeking specific knowledge on the pedagogical practices adopted, such as: languages and experiences in playful contexts; time periods, space, and materials; children's engagement and teachers' commitment. Visits to childcare centers were conducted, and specific scripts for interviews and classroom observations were closely followed. The data analysis regarding both operating conditions (physical infrastructure and materials) and pedagogical practices (for example, the lack of communication and poor interaction between teachers and boys and girls) indicates great challenges to be faced. Taking into account the current legislation, the advances in the field of Early Childhood Education, the great impact of educational experiences on the lives of infants and toddlers and even the risk of becoming ill to which they are exposed, the assessment carried out implies the abolishment of such public-private partnership agreements as a strategy to meet the demand for nursery services. On an emergency basis, as long as this sort of practice persists, there is an urgent need for greater public investment in order to guarantee these citizens' right to quality education.

Keywords: Quality assessment of early childhood education. Educational conditions. State-aided private childcare centers. Pedagogical practices.

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RESUMO

O foco deste trabalho foi a qualidade da educação oferecida nas 94 creches conveniadas de Fortaleza (Ceará). A primeira etapa levantou dados gerais sobre as condições de funcionamento (estrutura física, brinquedos, formação dos profissionais etc.) de 54 creches e a segunda incluiu 16 delas, buscando um maior conhecimento, especialmente, sobre as práticas pedagógicas desenvolvidas como as experiências e linguagens em contextos lúdicos; tempos, espaços e materiais; envolvimento das crianças e empenho dos professores. Foram realizadas visitas às creches, usando roteiros específicos para as observações e entrevistas. Tanto em relação às condições de funcionamento (como a estrutura física e materiais) quanto às práticas pedagógicas (a exemplo da falta de escuta e poucas interações entre professoras e os meninos e meninas), os dados indicam grandes desafios a serem enfrentados. Levando em conta a legislação vigente, os avanços da área da Educação Infantil e o grande impacto das experiências educacionais nas vidas dos bebês e crianças bem pequenas e mesmo o risco de adoecerem a que eles estão expostos ao frequentarem estas creches, a avaliação realizada indica a supressão do estabelecimento de convênios como estratégia para o atendimento da demanda por creches. Emergencialmente, enquanto este tipo de prática persistir, é urgente o maior investimento público em variados elementos do trabalho desenvolvido nesses equipamentos a fim de garantir o direito desses sujeitos à educação de qualidade.

Palavras-chave: Avaliação da qualidade da educação infantil. Condições educacionais. creches conveniadas. Práticas pedagógicas.

Introduction

The focal point of this paper is the education of children up to five years old in Fortaleza City (Ceará State, Brazil), mainly at so-called state-aided private childcare centers (*creches conveniadas*). Formerly known as community childcare centers (*creches comunitárias*), these facilities are currently referred to as indirect care centers (*unidades de atendimento indireto*), as they are maintained with public funds. As of the enactment of Law no. 13,019 on June 13, 2014 (BRASIL, 2014), they became officially labeled as “partnership childcare centers” (*creches parceiras*). In light of the concept of evaluation as put forward by Scriven (1991 *apud* ROSEMBERG, 2013, p. 49, our translation) as “the process of determining the merit, worth or value of something”, we expect to achieve here an evaluation in the field of Early Childhood Education.

It is generally accepted that the evaluation **in** early childhood education allude to child-focused strategies, the evaluation **of** early childhood education considers the institution that offers this educational stage and the evaluation of early childhood education **policies** tackles the government actions related to it. However, it is necessary to consider that the working conditions under which the pedagogical performance is carried out stem from specific public policies and are closely related to learning and development possibilities given to babies and children, as well as their well-being.

Rosemberg (2013) stated that there is both little research output about evaluation in this area and little focus on evaluation itself. But it has slightly changed already; in a survey carried out on the SciELO platform, covering the period from 2012 to May/2020, we found 23 published articles using keywords such as “Early Childhood Education” and “Evaluation”. It might signal, albeit timidly, that evaluation in early childhood education is beginning to pose a “social issue”, consequently making its way into the evaluation policy agenda, as defined by Rosemberg (2013).

When we give such articles an in-depth examination, it becomes clear that the evaluation of early childhood education is predominantly approached from a specific facet, such as the inclusion of children in special-needs education and the quality of play experiences. Only the article by Rosemberg (2013) and those by Campos (2013) and Moro (2019) simultaneously address the different aspects that constitute the quality of early childhood education and care.

Taking into account that “evaluation becomes reasonable when it subsidizes interventions that lead to the transformation and democratization of education, when it comes to access, permanence and quality” (SOUSA; OLIVEIRA, 2010, p. 818, our translation), the evaluation of Brazilian early childhood education assumes cardinal importance. This is because studies such as the one written by Campos *et al.* (2011) reveal that this educational stage has not yet overcome the precariousness and misconceptions that have marked its history.

Within the Brazilian context of great social inequality, children aged 0 to 6 years constitute the highest percentage of people living in extreme poverty, associated with the worst social indicators (ROSEMBERG, 2006). These children attend the most precarious childcare centers and pre-schools; in other words, welfare educational institutions, that is, “prejudiced against poverty, uncommitted to service quality” (KUHLMANN JR., 1998, p. 202, our translation).

The incorporation of state-aided private childcare centers into government social policies aimed at the most impoverished groups of the Brazilian population follows the logic of reducing costs to “care for” a greater number of children, which has been observed since the Brazilian military dictatorship

administrations. Under the influence of international agencies and bodies, the expansion of children's education benefited from pre-existing locations and the voluntary work of the families and the community.

According to Silveira *et al.* (2020), the Fortaleza City Government has been increasing the number of places in state-aided private childcare centers and, in 2016, the number of children who counted on this sort of educational service reached more than 4,600. Therefore, this survey aimed to better understand and evaluate the conditions under which so many children spend a large portion of their childhood. It is the result of a partnership between the *Ministério Público do Ceará* (MPCE) [Ceará State Prosecution Office], the *Faculdade de Educação da Universidade Federal do Ceará* (FACED-UFC) [Federal University of Ceará's Faculty of Education], the *Fórum de Educação Infantil do Ceará* (FEIC) [Forum for the Early Childhood Education in Ceará] and the *Conselho Municipal de Educação* (CME) [Fortaleza City Education Board].

Quality in Early Childhood Education

The debate about quality in the field of early childhood education began in the 1990s, focusing on both the concept and the process of its definition, thought to be a constitutive and stirring element of quality.

Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2004) bring to the fore the fact that quality is based on values, subjective concept; therefore, it is relative and fluid. The authors point out the need to contextualize it, spatially and temporally, so as to acknowledge cultural diversity and other community-related elements; hence, defining quality is an ongoing process, which requires amendments and, therefore, never reaches a final statement. Bondioli (2004) reaffirms this stand and believes that this debate has a transactional, participatory, self-reflective, contextual, plural, transformative nature. The outlining of quality indicators is also addressed by Oliveira-Formosinho (2001), who argues that this must be a problematizing, participatory, dynamic, evaluative, context-oriented process.

In Brazil, following the publication of the quintessential document entitled *Critérios para um Atendimento em Creches que Respeite os Direitos Fundamentais das Crianças* [Criteria for Childcare Services that Respect the Fundamental Rights of Children] (BRASIL, 1995), several other publications by the *Ministério da Educação* (MEC) [Brazilian Ministry of Education] have dealt with the issue of quality in early childhood education and have contributed to develop a certain level of consensus in the area. It is worth mentioning, for

instance, that the *Indicadores de Qualidade na Educação Infantil* [Quality Indicators in Early Childhood Education] (BRASIL, 2009b) suggest a system in which the self-assessment of quality includes the participation of professionals and family members from the school and the wider community (Child Protective Services workers, for example).

Thereby, the trend in the area has been to evaluate the conditions under which education is conducted. For the time being, the inclusion of early childhood education in the *Sistema Nacional de Avaliação Educacional* (SAEB) [Brazilian Educational Assessment System] has not revolved around mass evaluation of children, but rather of government-funded or public-private-partnership systems and facilities and, by sampling, also of private institutions.

The *Consulta sobre a qualidade na Educação Infantil* [Consultation on Quality in Early Childhood Education] (CAMPOS; CRUZ, 2006, p. 67, our translation) was the first Brazilian national survey that sought to collect data on what people involved in the process of education thought about the quality of early childhood education. The paper embraced the opinions of children, a strategy which was considered “fundamental to expand the repertoire related to the right to early childhood education and its quality”.

Methodology

The data gathering for this research was a two-staged process. It required the application of specific instruments to two distinct groups of childcare centers, which were randomly set apart, in view of the large number of state-aided private childcare centers in operation; precisely, 94 of them.

For the first stage of the data survey, we drew lots and selected 54 childcare centers (57.4% of the total). Of these a further draw narrowed the number of crèches that would also join the second stage of the survey to 16 (approximately 30% of the first group). In both stages, the number of nursery units selected was proportional to the total number of childcare centers in each of the *Secretarias Executivas Regionais* (SER) [Regional Executive Secretariats] in which the city is divided.

The first stage of the survey was carried out through a single visit to each childcare center, made by either pairs of students or professors from FAGED-UFC, technicians from MPCE and CME, and FEIC members. The objective here was to collect general information about these facilities, following a script with questions about their activities, physical structure, equipment and materials,

nutrition, staff, pedagogical approach, pedagogical monitoring tools, continuing education and educator-family relationship.

The visit included an interview with the childcare center's coordinator and observations of the physical facilities, furniture and materials used. For the most part, the interview was comprised of multiple choice questions, which should be answered by the crèche's coordinator. Still, a few questions were directed to the observers, specifically those regarding the evaluation of aspects such as general maintenance, ventilation and indoor air quality, level of natural lighting, and overall cleanliness.

In turn, the second stage of this research sought to increase knowledge about these childcare centers, bringing attention to the pedagogical practices adopted. It was carried out by undergraduate Pedagogy students who acted as monitors for any course related to early childhood education or who chose this topic for their capstone project final paper, students from the graduate program in Education, and professors at FACED - UFC.

The observation visits had the same duration as children's school hours in the selected childcare centers. For each of these units, we conducted drawing lots and one group of children got to be closely observed, and their educator interviewed.

Such observations were made based on the *Roteiro para orientar a visita à creche conveniada* [Guiding Script for Visits to State-aided Private Childcare Centers], which consists of three parts: an adaptation of the *Indicadores de qualidade da Educação Infantil Paulistana* [Quality Indicators for Early Childhood Education in São Paulo] (SÃO PAULO, 2016) and two scripts inspired by the Children's Engagement Index and the Teachers' Commitment Index (LAEVERS, 1994; OLIVEIRA-FORMOSINHO, 2001; PASCAL; BERTRAM, 1999).

The first part of the guiding script made it possible to assess 33 of the Quality Indicators for Early Childhood Education in São Paulo which referred to all aspects included in this document. In the adaptation we made, those indicators were transformed into questions and the observer should select the best fitting option among a set of responses such as "yes", "partially", "no" or "not applicable". Blank spaces were also available in the script, where any information deemed necessary could be added.

Taking into consideration the predominant behaviors in class during the activity hours under observation, the script included two more important elements pertaining to the quality of early childhood education: the children's engagement and the teacher's commitment. In our adaptation, the evaluation of the children's engagement with the activities proposed by the teacher could be expressed in only three options: "yes", "no" or "partial". Another aspect under scrutiny was the predominant behavior of the teacher regarding their

sensitivity to the children's demands and their commitment to promote learning and encourage autonomy, with each aspect considered as present ("yes"), absent ("no") or partially present ("partial").

The interview focused on aspects of pedagogical practices that could not be observed during the visit. The script of questions was also prepared based on the Quality Indicators for Early Childhood Education in São Paulo (SÃO PAULO, 2016).

State-aided private childcare centers in Fortaleza City: general information

Fortaleza City experienced a significant growth in enrollment in early childhood education and care over the recent years, peaking at 45,136 in 2020. However, while pre-school coverage has reached nearly 100% since 2016, the coverage for childcare programs is low: it barely goes past 30%, and the waiting list for places has more than 7,000 children, according to the Fortaleza City Department of Education.

The establishment of agreements with private entities aimed at providing childcare services has been part of the State of Ceará's public policies since 1987. Back then, it happened through the *Fundação do Bem-Estar do Menor do Ceará* (FEBEMCE) [Ceará Child Welfare Foundation], an agency of the *Secretaria de Ação Social do Estado* (SAS) [Social Welfare Secretariat]. Thus, until the end of the 1990s, these institutions were funded and supervised by the Social Care sphere, integrating childcare centers to welfare policies directed to impoverished people. Across the Ceará State, by the end of the 1990s, 455 of such facilities came into operation, 144 of which in the capital city.

Indirect education services, that is, those provided through state-aided private childcare centers, has always played a prominent role in Fortaleza. In this city, in addition to those established with SAS, other agreements and partnerships were also carried out by *Operação Fortaleza* (OPEFOR) [Operation Fortaleza], a foundation directly linked to the first lady of the city. The transition of these childcare centers to full City Government responsibility under education sphere only, in the late 1990s, has been troubled and stripped a large number of children of their right to education.

The oldest data referring to this sort of rendering of services show that such state-aided private childcare centers faced an array of serious problems, such as: low education background of educators; inadequate teaching activities coupled

with anticipation of schooling; unfit physical structure, with small, hot and poorly-lit indoor spaces; scanty teaching materials; lack of toys, children's literature books, mirrors etc.; and insufficient, bad-maintained furniture (CRUZ, 2001).

The state-aided private childcare centers also suffered from extended periods of waiting and idleness in their daily routine. Among other factors, it resulted mainly from the lack of planning of activities to be developed with the children, the centrality of teachers' efforts in their routine, the lack of a specific pedagogical approach elaborated and accepted by all professionals involved and, above all, prejudiced views towards children and their families. The vast majority of these crèches provided full-time childcare; therefore, the harmful consequences of all these problems for the wellness, learning process and development of children were even greater (ANDRADE, 2002). Despite all these long-standing problems, the service continued to expand in the capital city.

From 2010 to 2013, there was a decrease in the number of state-aided private childcare centers in Fortaleza City, but it has been increasing again since then: in 2013, there were 46 crèches, counting with roughly 3,600 enrollments (FORTALEZA, 2013), and in 2020 their total number was 98, serving 7,382 children (FREITAS, 2020). Therefore, both the number of childcare centers and enrollments grew more than 100%. We summarize below the information gathered in the first stage of this survey, regarding the operating conditions of such facilities.

Most of these childcare centers operated full-time and the number of children who attended them varied widely: 11.4% of them received more than 100 children, 66.8% fluctuated between 56 and 96 children, and 18.6% served a smaller number of toddlers.

With regard to these state-aided private childcare centers, 66.7% of them did not have an outdoor playground for children, only 20.4% of the existing ones were in good condition, and less than half of these few playground areas were well-equipped to be used by a large number of children. Such data are upsetting, as they imply that several children's rights were not being fully guaranteed. It is worth remembering that, since the 1990s, the importance of children having the right to come in contact with nature and to move freely in open spaces has been pointed out, which constitute two of the *Crerios para um Atendimento em Creches que Respeite os Direitos Fundamentais das Crianas* [Criteria for Childcare Services that Respect the Fundamental Rights of Children] (BRASIL, 1995). More recently, the *Base Nacional Comum Curricular* (BNCC) [Brazilian Common Core Curricular Standards] set forth six children's rights that must be guaranteed at early childhood educational stage, articulating the ethical, aesthetic and political principles arranged for in the *Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para a Educaao Infantil* (DCNEI) [Brazilian Curricular Guidelines

for Early Childhood Education]: socialize, play, participate, explore, express and know oneself (BRASIL, 2017). The absence or precariousness of outdoor spaces jeopardizes such rights.

An even profounder lack of outdoor pieces of equipment was witnessed in relation to the existence of sandboxes, as 84.6% of the childcare centers visited did not even have one and the number of those with well-maintained structures remained below 5%.

As for the inside premises of these institutions, most of them (87%) had two to five activity rooms in different sizes, with a greater concentration of rooms measuring between 12 and 24 m² (61.3%). However, nearly half (47%) had existing furniture that would not allow children to move around or play games, especially those that require broad motor skills. Furthermore, 56% of these spaces were poorly maintained or not more than reasonably maintained; natural lighting levels were inadequate for 32.7% of them; and 15.7% of the rooms had poor ventilation.

It is noteworthy that 40.7% of the childcare centers surveyed did not have a library or a reading corner. Such book collection areas could be found in just over half of the nursery units, with 46.3% of the literary collections being stored inside activity rooms and 13% in proper libraries. Children's access to literature was also hampered by other factors: where they existed, books were generally not in good shape and in 37% of the libraries natural lighting was inadequate and ventilation was not ideal in 59% of them.

Most childcare centers (84.9%) had only one bathroom intended for use by children, and at a particular institution there was no bathroom whatsoever. Other issues identified in these spaces were as follows: unsatisfactory ventilation; small number of child-friendly sanitary appliances, considering the number of boys and girls who used the facilities; and the absence of non-slip flooring.

Most childcare centers (64%) had only one bathroom for adults, although 25% of them had two. In these spaces, natural lighting and ventilation were considered very problematic; more than half were deficiently lit and approximately 60% presented either poor or fair ventilation conditions. Yet another noteworthy fact is that less than 10% of adult bathrooms were equipped with accessible wash basins and toilets in way to accommodate people with physical disabilities.

Other indoor spaces evaluated were dining halls and kitchens. Almost every childcare center (92.2%) had dining facilities at the disposal of children, with just over half of them in good condition. All nurseries featured a kitchen for food preparation, and the majority of them (71.2%) were well maintained. However, these spaces also faced challenges in terms of natural lighting and ventilation: in almost half of the cases (49%) the lighting was deemed inadequate and in most of them (60%) the ventilation was barely sufficient or even poor.

Below we present some other information about the physical structure and materials used that are worth mentioning: a) only 14.8% of the childcare centers were designed taking into consideration people with physical disabilities, which reinforces the need for investments in relation to accessibility; b) in a large number of cases, pollution could be found in the nursery unit or in its immediate vicinity, with environmental pollution being the most common (60.7%); c) half of the facilities lacked fire extinguishers; d) the amount of toys for toddlers aged two to three years was insufficient in 43.1% of the cases; e) the percentage of institutions that had large, eye-level mirrors for the children did not reach 50%, what restricts their possibilities of exploration, playing and construction of the self-image.

It is also important to highlight some information related to the staff in the childcare centers surveyed, especially teachers, since they have the greatest responsibility for the wellness, learning process and development of children. New job vacancies were disclosed in an informal and limited manner; in most cases (85%) it was done exclusively on a word-of-mouth basis or through posters displayed at the institution itself.

Concerning the processes for the selection of educators, the steps followed by the nursery units were basically a curriculum analysis (77.4%) and selection interviews (66%). Still, a few childcare centers (24.5%) adopted the professional referral as their sole means of selection, and only 7.5% of them submitted the candidates to a written test, which may indicate little appreciation for the knowledge required for the performance of early childhood education and care duties.

The minimum education background required for teachers for most of these institutions (66%) was a bachelor's degree in Education/Pedagogy. However, a high-school-level program in Primary Teaching and Learning was still accepted by 20.8% of the childcare centers and 13.2% of them acknowledged any other bachelor's degree as evidence of fulfillment of academic prerequisites.

These institutions disrespected the legal monthly wage floor for teachers, which in 2018 reached BRL2,455.35. Sixty five percent of actual wages ranged between BRL1,100.00 and BRL1,200.00, whereas the highest salary was still below BRL1,400.00/month. Low pay practices become even more evident when we consider that the weekly working hours for these teachers easily exceeded 40 hours, while 40% of them worked 44 hours per week.

As for the coordination of the childcare centers, no higher education was required to assume this role in 24% of the cases. It poses a worrying fact, due to its importance for the support and monitoring of the pedagogical practices applied in these institutions, which also must contribute to the continuing education for teachers. The majority (55.8%) of coordinators worked 40 hours per week,

while a significant percentage (32.7%) experienced extended workdays. Their wages were roughly the same as teachers': for 77% of them, monthly wages were equal to or less than BRL1,400.00.

Some childcare centers in the spotlight

The data presented below probe into the pedagogical practices employed in the 16 selected childcare centers and were obtained through observation and scripted interviews. Firstly, it is important to call attention to the quality aspects that had the most positive indicators, which were the following, in descending order: *Health and wellness promotion: experiences of being cared for and taking care of oneself, the others and the world* (199); *Educators' professional training and working conditions* (126); *Socio-cultural support network: educational unit, family, community and city* (128); and *Plurality of experiences and languages in child-directed, playful contexts* (109). In general, the prevalence of positive responses was seen in indicators assessed by professionals during interviews, what reduces their reliability. For example, inside the aspect entitled *Health and wellness promotion: experiences of being cared for and taking care of oneself, the others and the world*, in regard to the indicator that asked whether babies and early-age children were offered a fresh, healthy eating plate that meets their nutritional needs, including those who need special diets, they overwhelmingly answered "yes" (for 15 of the 16 crèches surveyed), even though the reality observed during our visits indicated otherwise.

On the other hand, the aspects that obtained the highest number of negative responses were as follows: *Plurality of experiences and languages in child-directed, playful contexts* (222); *Educational environments: time periods, spaces and materials* (164); *Ethnicity, race and gender relations* (163); and *Interactions* (116). Negative responses represented at least twice the amount of positive responses for the same aspect. Thus, for instance, when focusing on the *Plurality of experiences and languages in child-directed, playful contexts*, we registered 222 negative responses, as opposed to 109 positive ones. As for the *Interactions* aspect, the incidence of a negative feedback were ten times greater than favorable judgements (in this aspect, the indicator that scored the worst was "child/adult interaction", which got 116 "no" and only 11 "yes").

After the foregoing initial remarks, we shall proceed now to the presentation of the results for each separately-evaluated aspect, considering the entirety of the surveyed childcare centers.

- a) **Educational planning and management.** This was the only aspect measured purely based on the interviews carried out with the teachers. According to them, most of the 16 childcare centers had a consistent pedagogical approach outlined in a document, which has been designed along with teachers, coordinators and parents, as well as regularly revised by them. Nonetheless, four nursery units either lacked this sort of document or it was not available for everyone. Besides, in seven institutions, the planning, form of evaluation, choice of supplies and development of activities to be done with the children on a daily basis did not directly translate the intentions set out in their documented pedagogical approach. Based on teachers' claims, such circumstances were present in 11 institutions, which hints to a certain degree of persistence of a mere bureaucratic function to the documented pedagogical approach, since it was not consulted during the planning of activities.
- b) **Engagement, listening and authorship of infants and toddlers.** The pedagogical practices developed with babies and early-age children was marked by little listening – verbal and non-verbal – of what children had to say and almost no acceptance of their suggestions by the teachers, which indicates that they do not change or are problematized from the point of view and needs of the students. As an example, attempts of communication through their different forms of language were ignored altogether by teachers in three childcare centers and only partially heeded in six others. Hence, it is hardly surprising that only one of these nurseries actually observed the fundamental rights of infants and toddlers to individual attention and to free expression of emotions, as advised by the *Cr terios para um Atendimento em Creches que Respeite os Direitos Fundamentais das Crian as* [Criteria for Childcare Services that Respect the Fundamental Rights of Children] (BRASIL, 1995). The same situation was observed during their daily routine structure: the non-participation of babies and children largely prevailed, whether sharing choices or giving suggestions to the teacher. We witnessed the ideal procedure in only two nurseries, and only partially, which contradicts the principles of early childhood pedagogy, among which are the appreciation and understanding of children's real words and intentions and their way of seeing the world, in order to transform them into raw material for pedagogical action (OLIVEIRA, 2011). As a possible consequence of this type of environment, only one institution had most of its children engaged with the proposed activities. They displayed this through their level of concentration, energy spent, facial expressions and posture (OLIVEIRA-FORMOSINHO; ARA JO, 2004). It must be clarified that the engagement or lack of engagement

of children is not related to their overall development, characteristics and abilities, but to their current state in a given environment, instead. As Folque (2012, p. 17, our translation) points out, “it is considered that if children from a certain group show low levels of engagement, this is induced by the context, such as the nature of the activities, the quality of materials, interactions with adults etc.”

- c) **Plurality of experiences and languages in child-directed, playful contexts.** For the most part of the visited institutions, teachers partially supported infants and toddlers in achieving autonomy to carry out their own daily care routine, such as holding their baby bottles, reaching for objects, taking off their sandals, washing hands, using the potty/toilet, etc. Conversely, three childcare centers offered them no support at all. Only in three of the childcare centers surveyed the children’s development of autonomy was favored through the support of teachers, who encouraged kids to choose games, toys and materials, which reinforces the need for most nursery units to break “with the traditional conceptions of education that, in essence, overlook children’s right to be seen as competent and to have their participation facilitated” (OLIVEIRA-FORMOSINHO; FORMOSINHO, 2013, p. 32, our translation). Opportunities for children to move freely across open spaces and for infants and toddlers to play around were remarkably limited in these institutions: just one single teacher defined specific periods and areas where these individuals could play and physically experience the infinite possibilities of movement. Remaining consistent with what has already been mentioned, teaching practices in most institutions (12) did not observe children’s own pace and interests, as opposed to guaranteeing learning settings that “promote knowledge about themselves and the world through the expansion of sensory, expressive, bodily experiences that enable unrestricted movement, expression of individuality and **respect for their own pace and cravings**” (BRASIL, 2009a, emphasis added). Survey yielded similar results when it comes to the physiological needs during infancy and early childhood, for these were promptly addressed in just over half of the institutions. This set of data is disquieting, as it reveals negligence towards children’s right to experiences that promote learning, progress, wellness and autonomy development, and displays marked similarities with the situation described in the aforementioned research by Andrade (2002).
- d) **Interactions.** The quality of educational contexts in which children are placed and the multitude of interactions that are made possible for them directly influence the development of their foundational human traits, such as language, thought, affectivity, sociability, and the broadening of their knowledge and skills. Likewise, “the pedagogical practices that

frame the curricular planning for early childhood education should have interaction and playing as their guiding principles” (BRASIL, 2009a). Notwithstanding, 12 of the childcare centers **failed** to build the teacher-child interrelationship so as to promote trust, provide motivation, lend support, express approval, etc., including at crucial moments such as feeding and bathing, or changing diapers, clothes, and shoes. Once we are aware that “the moment of individualized care is a favorable opportunity for the development of verbal and non-verbal communication, requiring easy, gentle movements by the educator, accompanied by vocalization about that specific moment the child is experiencing, where there is manifestation of attention and interest towards the child” (FALK, 2016, p. 34, our translation), which favors the construction of a positive self-image, it is alarming that in eight institutions the teacher held no talk with the children during such activities. Only in three childcare centers teachers regularly talked to babies and small children, lowering themselves to their eye level, so as to establish eye and body contact throughout their daily routine.

- e) **Ethnicity, race and gender relations.** The fulfillment of the socio-political and pedagogical role of early childhood education implies, among other aspects, attention to the fact that childcare centers and preschools must meet their duty in promoting “new forms of sociability and subjectivities committed to democracy and civic awareness, and to the rupture of relations of domination with respect to age, socio-economic status, ethnicity and race, and/or gender” (BRASIL, 2009a). Thus, when the teacher does not carry out activities with babies and toddlers in order to cherish the differences between the racial and ethnic groups that constitute the Brazilian society, the educational institution not only fails to fulfill its role but also helps preserving the widespread, harmful relations of domination in our society, such as racism. In fact, this was what we found in almost all nursery units surveyed. Even in those with a stronger contrast among racial and ethnic groups – that is, in 14 of them – no actions were observed with view to celebrate such differences, and none of the childcare centers proposed knowledge-fostering activities on different cultures. Similarly, in nine institutions we witnessed no situations in which the children could interact and play without distinction regarding gender; on the contrary, in five childcare centers most activities, especially games, kept on with faulty restrictions that reduce the children’s possibilities of experiences and contribute to solidify all-prevailing prejudices in relation to male and female roles.

- f) **Educational environments: time periods, spaces and materials.** Opportunities for infants and toddlers to exercise their right to learn to play, explore and socialize were utterly restricted by how the environment was organized in most childcare centers: spaces, materials, objects and toys were not easily accessible in 13 of them and in eight there were no internal areas for games, movement and exploration of the environment. This situation was aggravated by the precarious infrastructure in ten of the nurseries. It must be noted that a few institutions used a television set, and did so inappropriately, taking most of the children's time to watch contents that did not match those individuals' creative potential.
- g) **Health and wellness promotion: experiences of being cared for and taking care of oneself, the others and the world.** Favorable circumstances for children to learn how to take care of themselves were observed in only five childcare centers, whereas most of the nursery units lacked such practice. In five institutions there was no situation that promoted this sort of learning and, in another six, this was only partially done. In just seven institutions, babies and children were offered a fresh, healthy, balanced diet. The cleanliness, hygiene and comfort inside most institutions surveyed were yet another low-scoring aspect: in 13 childcare centers, the main classroom was not or was only partially pleasant, clean, ventilated and quiet, with acoustics that allowed a good communication. Outdoor spaces also faced problems: in 10 crèches, these environments were not or were only partially pleasant, clean, ventilated and quiet, without excessive noise that prevented good communication. Therefore, it seems that the right of infants and early-age children to a cozy, safe, stimulating environment in their classroom and outdoor spaces was scarcely guaranteed. The aforementioned deteriorated conditions for the wellness, learning process and development of infants and early-age children is worsened when we take into account that in only two childcare centers the teachers were responsive to the demands of those individuals, when they assumed a posture that indicated **sympathy** towards their needs, listening to them and responding to them in an affectionate manner; only in four institutions the educators showed interest in **stimulating children's learning process**, motivating them in a clear way, encouraging dialogue and proposing assorted activities; and in only one childcare center the teacher exhibited a great deal of effort to enable the **development of children's autonomy**, allowing them to make choices and encouraging them to express their ideas, respecting their input even when it differed from hers. The absence of these attributes that signal the teachers' commitment – empathy, stimulation and autonomy (OLIVEIRA-FORMOSINHO; FORMOSINHO, 2001) – while

denotes weaknesses in their initial and continuing education, also reflects their working conditions. Thus, the problem is not the professionals' personality traits, but actually how their qualities are employed during teaching practice. After all, "adults who work in precarious conditions are more likely to display an attitude of non-commitment in their interaction with children" (FOLQUE, 2012, p. 6, our translation).

- h) **Educators' professional training and working conditions.** According to the teachers, in 14 of the childcare centers visited there were pedagogical meetings for content preparation, group study sessions, exchange of experiences, planning, deliberation on practice, production and systematization of records. They also reported that in just four childcare centers, continuing education opportunities went beyond these pedagogical meetings. The teachers and 14 of the coordinators joined in the routine meetings for continuing education and in other training programs offered by the *Secretaria Municipal de Educação* [Fortaleza City Department of Education] (SME). In contrast, the so-called classroom assistants did not have access to or were only partially included in such training opportunities, despite the fact that they too perform education-related and childcare-related activities with infants and young children.
- i) **Socio-cultural support network: educational unit, family, community and city.** In most of the childcare centers surveyed, teacher treated the families in a kind and welcoming manner, but in three of them the professionals acted otherwise and in six institutions teachers admitted not exchanging information about children with their families upon their arrival or departure. The fragility of this partnership between the educational institution and the families, despite the fact that these facilities are managed by community entities, became even clearer with the fact that in six childcare centers teachers revealed not knowing who the children's parents or relatives are (name, address, occupation, etc.), which indicates a stance of disregard for the background of the children they teach on a daily basis. Similarly, these educators also reported the absence of integrated actions with the services of social support network for the rights of infants and early-age children.

Conclusion

This survey provided the means to obtain a variety of hitherto unavailable information relating to the state-aided private childcare centers in operation in the City of Fortaleza, Brazil. As there are no similar data on other types of early childhood education service (either run by the government or by the private sector) carried out in this city, it is not possible to draw objective comparisons between them. Nevertheless, it is certainly evident that the state of affairs revealed by this information is highly worrying, for the aforementioned reasons which are summarized as follows.

Both in relation to the tangible operating conditions (physical infrastructure, materials, professional training, etc.) and pedagogical practices (such as experiences and languages in playful contexts; time periods, spaces and materials; levels of engagement and commitment) there are great challenges to be faced.

In fact, in many of the childcare centers visited, several of the fundamental rights of infants and early-age children are not observed, such as: having their bodies clean and healthy; eating, resting, and going to the bathroom and drinking water whenever they need; learning to play in different ways, in different places with different partners; moving around in open spaces; and increasing their set of skills and knowledge. Therefore, in addition to not contributing positively to the wellness and full development of these individuals, such nursery units may pose a risk of illness for them.

Unquestionably, the situation we found is noticeably better than the one described by Cruz (2001), especially as regards to the minimum education requirements for hiring teachers. Still, it is not enough in view of the current legislation, the achievements in the area of early childhood education and, above all, children's rights to quality education.

These were also the references adopted in this survey, as we tried to demonstrate throughout the text. As a matter of fact, carrying out an assessment of the operating conditions and pedagogical practices in the childcare centers selected for this survey would be unfeasible without elucidating the knowledge, principles and values that guided it since its inception throughout the probe conducted. We believe, therefore, in the possibility and even in the need for a greater evaluation of the service availability and the public policies for the early childhood education, becoming more integrated into the field of evaluation, as long as the elements that have been important for the consolidation of the identity of this educational stage are still present.

Rosemberg (2001) points out the importance and role of scientific research in the evaluation of projects, programs and policies in relation to this stage of education. According to the author, the knowledge produced by science must serve as a tool for those who engage in the clash of interests and pressures that continually define our social policies, contributing to the making of socially-fairer and more democratic decisions. Along these lines, we hope that we shall soon witness the data we gathered and the analysis we made in this survey being presented during a public hearing, as previously planned, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic that sweeps across our country.

This is one of the strategies, as well as the publication of this paper, so that our data and analysis can strengthen the arguments of professionals, organizations and the population in general in defense of the extinguishment of educational services for children rendered through state-aided private childcare centers and to persuade the government towards the expansion of state-owned crèches; that is, their own institutions with professionals who have passed a civil service examination. At the same time, while the current standard persists, we hope to have highlighted the need for strong public investment in various elements of the work developed by these facilities, particularly in the continuing education of educators, in order to guarantee the right of infants and early-age children to quality education, due to the great impact of educational experiences in their lives.

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