

ARTICLE

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION'S CURRICULUM – CONSIDERATIONS FROM CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The article analyzes the meanings produced by children about the educational experience. From a theoretical framework that articulates Walter Benjamin's theory of childhood studies, the sociology of social experience by François Dubet, and pedagogies of childhood and early childhood education, we sought to understand how the children's actions and speeches contribute to the proposition of a curriculum organized by fields of experiences. The case study was conducted in 2012 with a group of four-year-old children in a public institution of early childhood education. The data was produced through participant observation; drawings and photographs produced by the children (in association with their speeches); and interviews. We found that children produce meanings about care and education practices that may become useful elements in proposing a curriculum organized by fields of experience for early childhood education institutions.

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Education; Children; Curriculum; Fields of Experience.

### CURRÍCULO DA EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL – CONSIDERAÇÕES A PARTIR DAS EXPERIÊNCIAS DAS CRIANÇAS

**RESUMO:** O artigo analisa os sentidos produzidos pelas crianças sobre a experiência educativa. A partir de um quadro teórico que articula os Estudos da Infância, a teoria de Walter Benjamin, a Sociologia da Experiência de François Dubet e as Pedagogias da Infância e da Educação Infantil, busca-se compreender como as falas e as ações das crianças contribuem para a proposição de um currículo por campos de experiências. O estudo de caso foi realizado com um grupo de crianças de quatro anos de idade durante o ano de 2012 em uma instituição pública de Educação Infantil. Os dados foram produzidos por meio de observação

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participante; desenhos e fotografias elaboradas pelas crianças (conjugadas com suas falas) e entrevistas. Verificou-se que as crianças produzem sentidos sobre as práticas de cuidado e educação que podem se tornar elementos úteis na proposição de um currículo por campos de experiência para as instituições de Educação Infantil.

**Palavras chaves:** Educação Infantil; Criança; Currículo; Campos de Experiência.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on data from a study aimed at understanding how children make sense of the early childhood education institution. It aims at contributing to the discussion on the curriculum organized by fields of experience by bringing new perspectives on the specificities of children's social experiences and by making teachers and other professionals aware of the issue's complexity.

A theoretical-methodological framework located at the intersection of childhood studies (CORSARO, 2002, 2009; SARMENTO, 2002, 2005, *et al.*), Walter Benjamin's critical theory of culture (1984; 1918/1989; 2011); Sociology of Education (DUBET, 1996); childhood and early childhood education pedagogy (ROCHA, 1999; RECH, 2006; HADDAD, 2010; OLIVEIRA, 2010; BARBOSA & RITCHER, 2015; FOCHI, 2015; ROCHA & BUSS-SIMÃO, 2018; *et al.*) was used to answer the following question:<sup>2</sup> to what extent can children's actions and speeches contribute to the proposition of a curriculum organized by fields of experience for early childhood education institutions?

Since the 1980s, in Brazil, the State must ensure the right to education of all children from zero to six years and their families. With the Federal Constitution of 1988, Brazilian society developed a new understanding of childhood, and children became citizens with rights. Thus, the Constitutional Charter allowed overcoming views established in the collective imagination of our country that viewed boys and girls as a *tabulae rasae*—that is, individuals subject to the adult socializing action. Therefore, it is notable that in the last three decades, significant changes took place in Brazil's public education policies, especially regarding child care centers and education institutions.

The 1990s witnessed the establishment of a new milestone in the field of public policies for children, confirming the position of children as citizens with rights.<sup>3</sup> Since then, the Brazilian legal system has integrated nurseries and preschools into education systems, as

provided for in the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (BRASIL, 1996). Thus, the conception of the provision of care and education for children up to six years in the public sphere changed from a tradition of assistance, in which the early childhood education institutions were conceived as a *necessary evil* and an activity carried out mainly by private initiative (VIEIRA, 1986), to a more realistic conception considering the educational potential of these institutions.

From the moment early childhood education institutions began offering basic education along with primary and secondary education, as provided for in the Article 22 of the Guidelines and Framework Law, they officially began to have as an objective to develop the students, assuring them a fundamental training for the exercise of citizenship and subsidies to progress, whether for the job market or for later studies (Brazil, 1996). However, this objective, expressed in the Guidelines and Framework Law, should be interpreted and finely adapted to the educational specificities of child care centers and education institutions (Oliveira, 2010), since researchers and professionals in the area of early childhood education conceive of children as the center of the pedagogical process (not older students). Likewise, they argue that the social function of nurseries and preschools involves the articulation of child care and education situations ensuring the full development of children up to six years and not their preparation for future schooling.

From this point of view, the early childhood education policy, which began to be implemented in Brazil in the 1990s, calls for a curriculum organization that meets the legal requirements imposed by the educational legislation—integrating the official/prescribed curriculum and the curriculum as experienced (SACRISTÁN, 2000) by children in the context of nurseries and preschools—respecting the specificities of children up to six years (BARBOSA & RITCHER, 2015).

The enactment of Law No. 12,796 of 2013 establishes, among other provisions, the inclusion of early childhood education in the National Curricular Common Base for Basic Education, intensifying the debates and discussions on this issue. According to this law, Article 26 of the Guidelines and Framework Law is now worded as follows:

Early Childhood Education, elementary education, and secondary education curricula should have a common national basis, to be complemented in each education system and institution by a distinct part, required by regional and local characteristics of society, culture, economy, and students. (BRASIL, 2013)

The proposal of a National Curricular Common Base for nurseries and preschools is also based on the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education, first published in 1999 and revised and expanded in 2009. This mandatory document affirms that early childhood education curriculum is developed from the “articulation of the knowledge and experiences of children with the set of cultural, artistic, environmental, scientific and technological knowledge already systematized by humanity (Brasil, 2009, p. 06) The development of guidelines with broader training objectives followed international trends<sup>4</sup> proposing a curricular approach for early childhood education committed to holistic education—that is, focused on contributing effectively to the development of children and not on preparing them for future schooling (HADDAD, 2010). It should be noted that these Guidelines consider children’s games and interactions (among themselves and with adults) as structuring axes of pedagogical practices.

Thus, early childhood education curriculum should be organized in axes, centers, modules, or fields of experience that need to be articulated to the principles, conditions, and objectives expressed in the Guidelines. This prerogative allowed the establishment of the specificities of nursery and preschool curricula, which according to our legal system should be structured by fields of experience – curriculum organization different and at the same time distant from the curriculum organization of other levels of Basic Education. On the one hand, the inclusion of Early Childhood Education in the proposal of a National Curricular Common Base for Basic Education is relevant, since it allows the Curriculum Guidelines to be implemented through pedagogical practices that respect the different dimensions of childhood and the rights of children. On the other hand, due to the political and economic moment that the country is experiencing, teachers may misinterpret it as a list of competences that children must acquire while they participate in Early Childhood Education<sup>5</sup> (CAMPOS & BARBOSA, 2015).

Thus, a question emerges among professionals and researchers in the area of education of children from zero to six years: what is meant by fields of experience? In the official text of the National Curricular Common Base, fields of experience are defined as “a curriculum organization appropriate to the education of children from 0 to 5 years and 11 months, when certain experiences lived by them promote the acquirement of relevant knowledge” (BRASIL,

2016, p. 62). Thus, the text of the National Curricular Common Base does not define what actually are fields of experience – which has raised different questions among Basic Education teachers, militants and researchers of the area. Some of these questions are: which experiences are relevant in the promotion of the development of boys and girls in the context of nurseries and preschools? The experiences uniquely lived in the school, or those lived in the wider social life? Who decides on the relevance of the experience that can be amplified? The child care professional (adult) or the children? These reflections evidence the imprecision of the concept of fields of experience that guides the National Curricular Common Base. That is, the definition of fields of experience found in the document is still incipient and does not advance in its conceptual definition, which can lead to misunderstandings of nurseries and preschools teachers.

However, following the proposal of the Guidelines, it places the interactions and games, through which children make sense of the world around them, at the center of the pedagogical work carried out in nurseries and preschools (OLIVEIRA, 2010; FOCHI, 2015). In the official text, five fields of experience are defined and presented: the self, the other and the nodes; body, gesture, and movements; dashes, sounds, colors and images; listening, speaking, language and thinking; spaces, times, quantities, relations and transformations (BRASIL, 2016).

The proposal of a National Common Base for Basic Education, by presenting and disseminating a curriculum organization by fields of expertise for nurseries and preschools, has produced a new challenge for the area: to make professionals aware of the need to develop approaches that by getting closer to the experiences of children allow the development of new educational experiences in a contextualized and meaningful way for both children and adults, allowing a greater understanding of the specificities of teaching in child care centers and education institutions.

This paper aims to raise awareness among nursery and preschool professionals, thus contributing to the debate on early childhood education curricula by allowing an extension of the concept of fields of experience. This project was conducted using data from a study conducted with a group of four-year-old children in an early childhood education public institution in the city of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

The paper is organized into four sections: in the first part, we present the theoretical contributions that allowed to us to understand

the experiences of children in the environment of early childhood education. In the following section, we present the methodological procedures of the study. In the third part, we analyze the speeches and actions of the children to allow a greater understanding of the fields of experiences. Finally, we make our final considerations.

## INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES TO UNDERSTAND THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CURRICULUM

The proposition of a curriculum by fields of experience consists in centralizing in the educational project of nurseries and preschools the actions, speeches, knowledge, and doings of children that, interpreted and made sense by early childhood education teachers, can be translated into new educational situations. Thus, in developing a curriculum based on the experiences of children of all genders, the area of early childhood education agrees that the needs of children “both from the point of view of their development and their relation to society are reference points of educational projects” (SACRISTÁN, 2000, p. 42) carried out within nurseries and preschools. It is, therefore, a curriculum organization that considers the relevance of the social experience of individuals to the organization of pedagogical practices, enabling the re-creation of cultural life by potentially educational experiences.

For our purposes, the curriculum was conceived as an educational project that begins from a process of cultural selection that is “*socially, politically and administratively conditioned, permeates the school activity and becomes a reality within the conditions of the school as it is organized*” (SACRISTÁN, 2000, p. 34; italics in the original). However, it is important to consider that, in the Brazilian context, any discussion on a curriculum for nurseries and preschools is based on the proposition of a childhood pedagogy. According to Rocha (1999), this pedagogy considers the children in their integrality and as an object of concern, taking into account “their processes of constitution as human beings in different social contexts, their culture, their intellectual, creative, esthetic, expressive, and emotional capacities” (p. 62). In this sense, the early childhood education curriculum is understood as a sociocultural production that simultaneously reflects the choices of those who formulate it, the several disputes between different social groups, and the developmental needs of children up to six years.

Although the debate on nursery and preschool curricula began in Brazil in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the rise of new

theoretical and legislative references to children up to six years old and the public offering of education and child care for such children (SILVA, 2008), the inspiration for this discussion comes from other historical and social contexts. Sacristán considers that the proposition of a curriculum from the experiences of the children has its genesis in the pedagogical renewal frameworks—inaugurated by progressive American educational thought and the European New School—because those movements, from their beginnings, were inspired by the holistic development of individuals<sup>6</sup> (SACRISTÁN, 2000).

By focusing on the experience of individuals in the educational process, this form of curriculum organization presupposes flexible ways of thinking and preparing the pedagogical practice in nurseries and preschools, since it encompasses the conception of a vivid and open curriculum whose contents become languages by which children live together and interact with each other daily in the context of early childhood education and, at the same time, are articulated in a way that contributes to their full development. This model contradicts and opposes curricular formulations that are content-centered and therefore decontextualized, distant from the context experienced by both boys and girls (SANTOMÉ, 1998; SACRISTÁN, 2000).

The development of a curriculum based on children's experience requires overcoming the idea that children are inert social beings within the process of socialization (JAMES & PROUT, 1997). Thus, children are conceived as individuals engaged in the complexity of social dynamics and who have peculiar modes of make sense of their surrounding reality, which currently is named as childhood or peers culture (SARMENTO, 2005; CORSARO, 2009).

This concept considers that, in interacting with each other, as well as in the relationships they establish with adults, children appropriate an interpretative understanding of cultural knowledge and articulate it in the process of symbolic production through which social learning occurs. In other words, from the *intergenerational* and *intragenerational* relationships, children do not present themselves passively. On the contrary, they take a remarkably interactive position, especially when interacting with their peers, situations where they learn from one another in shared social environments, thus forming a peer culture. These cultures can be understood as “a set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns of children that are shared in the interaction with their peers” (CORSARO, 2009, p. 32).

Influenced by recent developments in the field of childhood studies, Corsaro (2009) developed an interpretive approach that



considers child socialization to be more a reproductive than a linear process, more participative than passive. It is an interpretive reproduction of the culture in which

...the term interpretive captures the innovative aspects of children's participation in society, indicating that children create and participate in their unique peer cultures by incorporating information from the adult world to serve their interests as children. The term reproduction means that children not only internalize culture but actively contribute to production and social change. (CORSARO, 2009, p. 31)

In this perspective, children are considered active participants in a social network constituted since an early age and, with the development of communication and language, build their social relations. Associating this with the widening of their context of interactions, children expand their possibilities of assimilating the world around them, thus expanding peer culture and rebuilding adult culture (Corsaro, 2009). The development of peer culture and other forms of social action by children demonstrates their ability to construct and reconstruct their own experiences, which makes peer culture a relevant concept in the understanding, identification, and organization of a curriculum by fields of experience.

By focusing on the behaviors of children from this analytical bias, the set of actions in the environment of early childhood education has been understood as children's own work on themselves, the effects of which have implications for the organization of early childhood education institutions and, more broadly, for the situations of child care and education experienced in this context.

Thus, it is necessary to articulate a theory of social action that allows an understanding of the logic guiding children's conduct focusing on constructing their experiences in early childhood education institutions. In this sense, studies by François Dubet (1996) are of great importance, although they are still little used in the context of the sociological study of childhood and investigations into the forms of construction of social actions by children (SANTOS & SILVA, 2016). It should be noted that Dubet has developed a sociological theory in which actor and structures influence each other without, however, the prevalence of one over the other.

According to Dubet (1996, p. 93), the concept of social experience is the most appropriate "to designate the nature of the object found in some empirical studies in which social behavior does not seem reducible to the pure application of internalized



codes or strategic choices transforming action in a series of rational decisions.” According to him, individual and collective conducts are not dispersed in the continuous flow of daily life but are guided by permanent principles with a certain level of heterogeneity that enables the discussion of experiences that are defined by the articulation of different logics of action.

For Dubet, the elements that make up the social experience do not belong to the actors but are provided (or imposed) on them either by a set of norms, social relations, or tensions deriving from situations of conflict. In Dubet’s words, “the actor constructs an experience that belongs to him from logics of action that do not belong to him but are offered by the several dimensions of the system that separate from each other as the classic image of functional unit of the society<sup>7</sup> moves away” (1996, p. 140).

Thus, social experience is created from the moment the actors are forced to manage at the same time different logics regulating the action originating from the several orientations provided by the social system. For Dubet (1996), the articulation of logics of action that regulate the individuals’ experience does not have a central point because it is not based on a single logic. “Social experience, insofar as its unity is not provided, necessarily enables an activity of individuals, a critical capacity and distancing from themselves” (DUBET, 1996, p. 94). In this way, the author explains that the notion of experience implies a cognitive activity—that is, it is a way of assigning meaning to reality and, most important, verifying and experiencing it. The concept of experience, as formulated by Dubet, presupposes an actor’ work on himself, an activity that enables the construction of meaning about reality in the face of the fluidity characteristic of contemporary life.

For Dubet, social experience derives from the combination of three logics of action corresponding to three major types of social systems. The first, *logic of integration*, is associated with the idea of integration, which for a long time has been called community. The second, *logic of strategy*, is finely articulated with the understanding of the social system as a market, a space of competition, and competitiveness among the individuals. The third, *logic of subjectivation*, presupposes a cultural system in which the creativity of the actors is not reduced to tradition and utility. Each of these logics of action refers to elements that were subsumed by the “classical” notion of society, and as they are now viewed separately, it is necessary to distinguish the logics of action corresponding to them.

**Logic of integration.** This encompasses the integration mechanisms present in any society; an actor's identity resembles the subjective version of system integration. According to Dubet (1996), identity is nothing more than the set of institutionalized values internalized by the actor through social roles.

**Logic of strategy.** This can be understood as instrumental rationality, a utilitarian action that aims to integrate the intended purposes with the opportunities that emerge *in and through the* situation. For Dubet (1996), the logic of strategy consists of a subjective orientation of action in which the actors define social relations, so that they evaluate, articulate, and combine the resources available and the objectives to be achieved. In this logic, the individuals analyze the ends and the means in the course of the action, articulating them with the purpose of reaching certain objectives related to the situations lived. He considers that the actors evaluate the possibilities of influencing others to meet their interests and demands.

**Logic of subjectivation.** This is the logic of the subject, indirectly manifested in the critical activity “that assumes that the actor is not reducible neither to the roles he plays nor to his interests when he adopts a point of view different from that of integration and strategy” (DUBET, 1996, p. 130). According to Dubet, in this logic of action, actors, through reflexivity, of the movement of detachment that they take from integration and competition, and the use of creativity, can experience themselves as subjects.

It is motivating to think of children's social action as an articulation of logics of action as proposed by Dubet (1996) because a theory with this scope allows the analysis of the relationship between agency and structure without the prevalence of one over the other. However, it is inappropriate to entirely apply this theoretical approach to the sociological study of childhood. Thus, some reservations need do be made.

The first is that the early childhood education is an educational space wherein the integrating dimension matters. Although not exclusively, this institution provides children with a set of daily experiences and knowledge inherent to the basic training of individuals in our society. Thus, although the norms expressed by the legislation and the internal norms regulating early childhood education institutions—including those establishing that adults are responsible for the organization and performance of daily child care and education situations but do not totally influence the actions of adults and

children—they are part of the context in which children’s experiences take place in the educational routine (ROCHA & BUSS-SIMÃO, 2018).

Moreover, it is of utmost importance not to entirely apply to the analysis of children’s experiences the notion of social action used to analyze adult subjects “based on the cognitive dimension, the capacity of verbal expression, and responsibility for their actions. In this sense, the expressions *social actor* and even *social experience* must relativize the autonomy inherent to them (even for adults)” (SANTOS & SILVA, 2016, p. 137).

Regarding the idea of social experience developed by Dubet, it should be pointed out that, for him, the researcher understands the social experiences in a privileged way through the discourse of the investigated subjects. They tend to explain and to expose their points of view according to the meanings of their experiences, revealing in which register of action—that is, in which logic they act in certain social situations (DUBET, 1996). Undoubtedly, this is not the case with children’s actions: if, on the one hand, children are considered social beings capable of intervening in the relationships they have and, therefore, can speak in their own right (2006); on the other hand, it is necessary to consider the complexity of their universes of relationships that are articulated between *intra* and *intergenerational* relationships. It is also important to emphasize that, in the processes of moving away from social roles, actors need to articulate cognitive dimensions to make criticisms, an exercise that may be still difficult for children. Thus,

We agree with the critique of childhood and children scholars of the sociology that excluded them from thinking about social life and society, approaching them as secondary actors in studies on institutions, especially the family and school. Furthermore, we understand that children participate actively in their socialization process, in a relational context between peers characterized by norms, codes, and practices that, although conditioned by the general culture and broader system of action, encompass what has been considered a *childhood* or *peer culture*. Given that they are children, they are at an early stage of the process of human development (physical, affective, social, cultural and cognitive). In this stage, verbal language is not the main form of communication and apprehension of the world, the other and themselves. (SANTOS & SILVA, 2016, p. 138; italics in the original)

In short, it is necessary to consider that Dubet’s idea of logics of action for the understanding of the subjects’ performance (which he called social experience) can be a way to understand children’s experiences. However, reservations need to be noted, especially regarding the prevalence of the cognitive dimension in the articulation between means and ends—the actions of distancing from the roles

that subvert the expected in a given context. Children fully live in the various social environments in which they participate (including in the environment of early childhood education), articulating at the same time cognitive, affective, and motor dimensions in the social relations they have with peers and adults and in their interpretation of situations (SANTOS, 2015). Thus, it is necessary to articulate other theoretical approaches to allow a sensitive view of the way children express the meaning of their experiences. In this way, Walter Benjamin's critical theory of culture provides elements that allow identifying units of meaning for situations experienced by children in early childhood education institutions.

In his vast, complex, and multifaceted work, Benjamin presents conceptual elements that make it possible to differentiate the experience of the elders (which he states is almost extinct) and of the small ones—and that this could be considered for the proposition of a curriculum by fields of experience.<sup>8</sup>

According to an 1928 essay by Benjamin, “the world perceived by children has vestiges of the older generation everywhere, with which the child is confronted” (1984 [1928], p. 72). This presupposes that by playing and interacting with their peers in different ways, children create for themselves a small cultural world by a creative dialogical exercise. They not only scrutinize aspects to be reproduced in the broad sociocultural world of adults, but create innovative, genuine, and interpretive ways with which they perceive and recreate social relations and culture. In this way, often what the adults create—by judging is more suitable to them—is less interesting to children. Likewise, the notion of reiteration stated by Benjamin also contributes to the differentiation of the social experience of the elders—which, he says, is an experience currently in decline—and of the small ones. Benjamin claims that repetition has a central place in the child's experience. “Repetition is the soul of the game, nothing rejoices more a child than the one more time [...], and in fact, all deeper experience claims insatiably for the completion of things, repetition and return” (BENJAMIN, 1989, p. 74). While adults describe their experiences, often avoiding reliving them because they consider the exercise a mere schematic reproduction, children use the typical repetition of games as a way of understanding their surroundings; this promotes the construction of their own experiences.

Another relevant aspect of the organization of a curriculum by fields of experience is the mobilization of situations, stories, and

narratives by children that, when articulated, are a *continuum*. In a 1918 essay entitled *On the Future Philosophy Program*, Benjamin deals with the complexity that surrounds the issue of the continuity of experiences. Based on Kant, he thinks about the possibilities of constructing a wider experience (considered by him as transcendental) and could, therefore, be conceived as a form of knowledge (BENJAMIN, 1918/1989). This author considers that there is a necessary element to all experiences: its continuity. In this sense, no experience begins in itself; neither is finished in itself. Experiences are interconnected (in time and space), and there is *continuity* among them (BENJAMIN, 1918/1989).

Jorge Larrosa (2002), following the theory of Benjamin, considers that experience is whatever happens to us, what we go through and what is touching for us: “not whatever happens, whoever goes through it, or whatever is touching.” (LARROSA, 2002, p. 21). He states that, in this perspective, the subject of experience is understood as a sensible body, “a territory of passage” in which experience is constructed subjectively: “The subject of experience it is like a passing territory, something like a sensitive surface, which is affected by what happens in some way, creates some affections, inscribes some marks, leaves some vestiges, some effects” (LARROSSA, 2002, p. 24).

This leads us to this question: what experiences are touching for children? How can early childhood education professionals identify, understand, let themselves be touched, and thus share the experience *of* and *with* children? What fields of experience arise from the actions and social relations experienced by children?

## METHODOLOGICAL WAYS FOR INTERPRETING CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES

The study was conducted using the case study methodology (SARMENTO, 2003), based on a set of data production tools that, when articulated, gave visibility to the actions and speeches of children, among which we highlighted these: participant observation; photographs and drawings combined with orality; and interviews with the children.

Based on the assumption that the construction of a single data-producing instrument allows a superficial reading of the object of study, we understood that “a good database contains points of view collected from as many perspectives as possible” (GRAUE & WALSH, 2003, p. 127). At the first stage of the empirical investigation, we collected the data through participant observation and recorded it in a field notebook and with audio-visual

recordings, allowing a broad description (GEERTZ, 1973/1989) of the experiences lived by children in early childhood education institutions. Subsequently, we suggested the creation of drawings and photographs—productions that were considered along with the words of the children. Subsequently, the speeches of the children were transcribed, and their productions (drawings and photographs) were stored in digital format for analysis, allowing examination of their points of view on the educational experience in that context. In the last stage of fieldwork, which was dedicated to listening to the children, we conducted individual interviews as a way of comparing the data obtained by the other research instruments.

It is important to clarify that when both the drawings and the photographs produced by the children were within the scope of visual methods (BANKS, 2004; FARIAS & MÜLLER, 2017) they became especially appropriate for accessing children's forms of expression, becoming "acts of cultural creation that reveal specific forms of social action undertaken by children rather than biopsychological processes of development" (SARMENTO, 2011, p. 40).

For Farias and Müller (2017), visual methods allow the co-participation of children in the research process (from data production to data interpretation), aiding researchers in explaining the ways of life of children. For these researchers, a fundamental aspect of these methods is that they make use of visual materials produced by the researcher or by the study participants.

Throughout the empirical investigation, drawings and photographs were produced by the children with the purpose of enabling a photo-elicitation exercise—conceived as the "use of images to helping trigger a narrative" of the children on their lived experiences in the early childhood education institution (FARIAS & Müller, 2017, p. 267). This technique allowed the photographs, drawings, and other images (produced by the subjects or not) to be used in the data production process to amplify elements of the dialogue between the researchers (adults) and children. Therefore, photo-elicitation "is aligned with the presuppositions of visual methods for encouraging greater cooperation among the study participants, who were also considered co-researchers in this context" (FARIAS & MÜLLER, 2017, p. 267).

The data was obtained in 2012 during seven months spent in an Early Childhood Education Municipal Unit (UMEI) located in the city of Belo Horizonte. Eighteen children aged four and five years studying

in the morning sessions participated in the study. Of those, eight were girls, and ten were boys. Two teachers who worked daily with the children also participated. All the children were regularly enrolled at the time of the study, with only one having attended the institution since the nursery. The others were in their first year at the Rosa dos Ventos UMEI.

For ethical reasons, the name of the institution is a pseudonym chosen by the institution's professionals. The same ethical procedure was adopted for the study participants. It should be pointed out that the parents and guardians of the children signed a consent form allowing them to participate in the study and the use of their images and creations for analysis purposes. Furthermore, regarding the consent and acceptance by children, it depends on a tacit process in which uncertainty and unusualness prevail (KRAMER, 2002). The research that seeks to dialogue with children depends not only on a "yes" or a "no" or their signature in a consent form but also on a consent that is implicitly granted. This is because the logic that led the legal process of consent for participation in research could not be adopted by a researcher seeking to understand a child's consent (KRAMER, 2002; ALTERTHUM, 2005).

## **CURRICULUM BY FIELDS OF EXPERIENCE: CHILDREN'S CONTRIBUTIONS**

The contact with children in the early childhood education institution allowed the researchers to assimilate elements that demonstrated how the children perceived their experiences in this context, specially lived experiences related to the physical space, adults, peers, situations, and conditions provided to them. Thus, considering children as subjects actively engaged in the complexity of the social fabric, we sought to understand how they perceived and gave meaning to the educational experience in the context of early childhood education. The understanding of how children give meaning to the educational experience provides insights into the discussion on the organization of curriculum by fields of experience insofar as it allows to understand the specificities of social action of children.

The early childhood education institution is a space socially organized and strongly structured by adults. When acting in this context, children often face situations that deliberately influence their agency (social action ability) and their decisions to accept and align their actions to these regulations or refute them by creating new possibilities. It was observed that although the early childhood



education institution did not necessarily organize its routine through the same logics of action present in the wider social system, it reproduced them in some situations and moments.

In this study, by giving children a voice and visibility to their actions, we identified the presence of an integrative logic (DUBET, 1996) guiding the behavior of adults and children in lived experiences in early childhood education. This integrative logic was revealed in a set of situations and moments planned by the teachers that showed the hidden curriculum that, in that context, was more committed to the students' production than to the integral development of children (RECH, 2006). These moments and situations, generated in the collective imagination of early childhood education professionals as "activities," were contaminated by the institutional context of the school model, which is not suitable for young children given the specificities of early childhood education" (RECH, 2006, p. 61; italics in the original).

In the interviews with the children, it became evident that the early childhood education institution was set up as a space of learning focused on the schooling process and, therefore, its main task was to initiate/introduce children into the scholarly world. In the words of Marcelo, Ana, and Maria Clara, this statement became quite evident. When asked about their daily experiences in the early childhood education institution, this is what these children said:

*"I come to write, play and draw; things like that."* (Marcelo, 08/05/2012)

*"Ah, writing, doing activities, playing in the playground located above or below. We play on the playground. The other things we do in the classroom."* (Ana, 08/05/2012)

*"To study! Learn things... play! There are lots of toys here!"* (Maria Clara, 06/08/2012)

A hierarchy established between the different situations the children experienced within the institution was notable in their speech. Some of the words that appeared in their statements were "to write," "to do activities," and "to learn," followed by words expressing other situations and experiences, such as "to play" and "to draw." The words "to write" and "to study" were predominant in some of the children's descriptions. For example, the photograph taken by Márcio corroborated this claim:

**FIGURE 1.** Márcio took this photo.

*Researcher: Look, Márcio, out of the photos you took of the things you do at UMEI, which ones do you like most?*

*Márcio: The playground one!*

*Researcher: But at that time you wanted to take a photo of the classroom, I remember! Do you like the classroom, too?*

*Márcio: Yes, I like!*

*Researcher: Why?*

*Márcio: It's because there we learn a lot of things with Teacher Mariane and with Teacher Bruna!*

*Researcher: What kind of things?*

*Márcio: Writing, counting...things like that! (04/09/2012)*

**Source:** research archives.

Rocha and Buss-Simão consider that the contexts of early childhood education are marked by an “intentional action” that determines the children’s experiences. Based on Dubet (1996), these authors claim that this process provides constraints and rules very similar to those “typical of total organizations, with strong time, space, and material limits, but at the same time, it presents a set of possibilities, especially of social action, inherent to a collective

life” (ROCHA & BUSS-SIMÃO, 2018, p. 31). In this sense, it does not matter how these schools integrate content in the form of “activities”; this hidden curriculum is not rigidly placed on the children, since it does not exactly exhibit a schooling practice or a pedagogical position committed to the specifications of childhood (RECH, 2006), making it possible for children to act within the context of the care and education provided for them. Thus, if (a) the early childhood education institution has an integrative dimension highlighted by a set of rites and situations whose purpose is to place children into the scholarly world and (b) children can subjectively move away from this representation and understand the early childhood institution as space for social relations, this emphasized the emergence of another curriculum parallel to that proposed by the teacher. When asked about which experiences they had the most<sup>9</sup> taste for in the early childhood education institution, “playing” was undoubtedly the most common answer, even though the practices placed upon children during the schooling process highlighted the children’s understanding in respect of the educational experience.

*“I like to play! I really like that.”* (Carina, 07/08/2012)

*“To play! Playing tag with Márcio!”* (Jonas, 06/08/2012)

*“When you use toys!”* (Marcus, 06/08/2012)

*“It is good to play here! To play with all the kids. I like to play here.”* (Paula Beatriz, 08/01/2012)

In addition to the perceiving children’s involvement in certain social practices within the scope of early childhood education, as well as their preferences in relation to what they had experienced within that educational context, it also became possible to ascertain what the children did not like—that is, situations that were imposed on them and in which they generally failed (moving away from the integrative dimensions present in the early childhood education institution’s organization of time and space). When asked about which experiences they did not like at the institution, these were some of the answers:

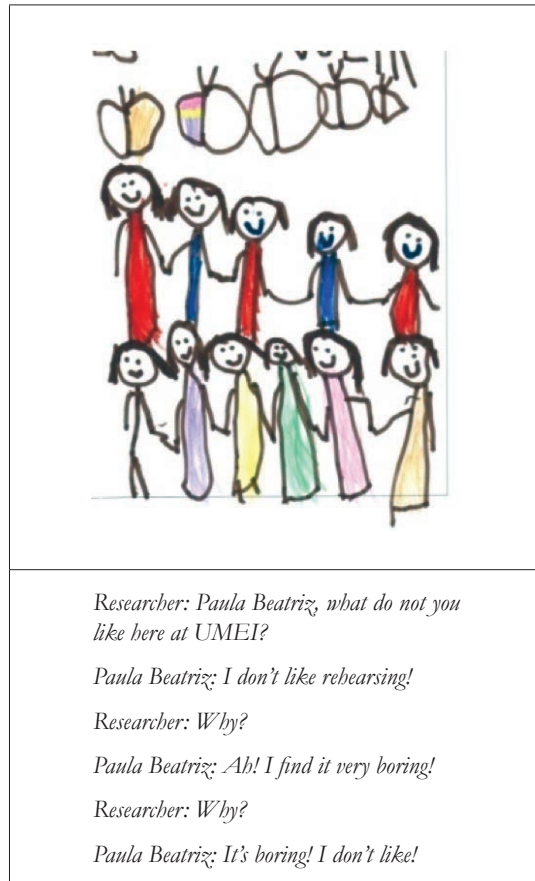
*“To read the book! Reading the book is very...boring! Sometimes I don’t like it! In the books, I only like to see the drawings!”* (Marcelo, 08/05/2012)

*“Ah...to write! I don’t like to write because my hand hurts.”* (Ana, 08/05/2012)

*“I don’t like when you have to draw the letters.”* (Maria Clara, 06/08/2012)

Paula Beatriz's drawing also shed light on the displeasure of situations that were imposed on them, as well as the children's capacity to carry out—even if they did not have the means—a critique of the imposition of decontextualized tasks within the socialization process, an important part of the curriculum for those within the institution:

**FIGURE 2.** Paula Beatriz drew "The things I don't like to do at UMEI."



**Source:** research archives.

Marcus's photograph demonstrated that, beyond the dissatisfaction in situations in which the children were not allowed to be the feature in the learning process, there is a need to consider a playful element in such activities carried out by the teacher within the students' classrooms:

**FIGURE 3.** Marcus took this photograph. Source: research archives



*Researcher: And what are the things you do not like?*

*Marcus: I do not like doing activity!*

*Researcher: Why?*

*Marcus: Ah...playing is better! Sometimes is cool to do an activity, but sometimes is boring! What I really like are Bruna's games.*

*Researcher: And what kind of games does she play?*

*Marcus: Bingo, bowling, lots of things!*

**Source:** research archives.

The fact that the children disapproved of mechanical situations they experienced in the curriculum within the institution, activities that generally involved written language, did not allow them to infer that they did not like such moments. In the data generation process, Ana said, "I don't like to write because my hand hurts." The set of the data constructed together with the children affirmed that this did not mean that she did not like situations that involved the written language. In contrast, several experiences in which the children were involved in situations that prioritized the acquisition of written language and were loaded with meaning for them were present in the framework. The excerpt below is illustrative of this observation:

Teacher Bruna starts a play with modeling clay. She asks the children to choose a ball of clay, then hands them a little popsicle stick and suggests that they create whatever they want.

While the children play, the teacher corrects the notebooks with homework. As soon as she has corrected all the notebooks, Bruna interferes with the clay play: she suggests that each child build the first letter of their name. To those who could not, she asked to make any letter they wanted. Most of the children were able to “model” the initial letter of their name, and as soon as they built it, they were encouraged by the teacher to choose another letter and model it with clay. After several such buildings, Professor Bruna challenges the children to model the first letter of my name: the letter “S.” The children begin to try, and Júlio demonstrates greater competence and creativity to deal with the challenge: he gets up from the table, puts the clay over the letter “S” on the wall panel, and begins to model it. From this situation, children begin to use this “technique” to build their letters.

At a certain point, the teacher proposes a modification in the proposal: she asks that the children now leave the modeling clays and, on a sheet of paper, write the letters that they had “modeled.” All of them perform the task, and those who found it less difficult were encouraged by the teacher to help those who faced more difficulties. After writing the letters of their names, Paula Beatriz and Ana ask me if I would like to see them write the letters of my name. I say yes, and the girls begin to sketch the letters of my name on their sheets. (Notes from field notebook, 05/14/2012)

This incident provided evidence for some questions to analyze and reflect upon: (a) the children become involved, almost completely, with situations that were guided by playfulness, as when the teacher started the written language experience with a modeling clay game and not with a worksheet; (b) the children became involved in challenging situations, as when the teacher gradually guides them from the clay modeling to producing written; (c) the children showed total involvement; (d) there was recognition on the part of the educator of the benefit of making the activity more meaningful for the children; and (e) the children initiated a magnification of the activity, as when Ana and Paula Beatriz wrote the letters of their names and asked the researcher if he would also like to see them write the letters of his name. With respect to this last item, note that Ana is the same girl who alleged during the interview not to like to writing.

In the event above, developing a *technique* constructed by Júlio to fashion the letter “S” became *strategically* applicable for other children, who *from* and *by way* of this boy’s action, learned that there were other ways to approach a task posed by the teacher. In accordance with the task’s complexity (that it goes gradually from modeling with clay to written language experiences), the children’s actions happened as possibilities constructed from this same proposal and were expressed by the children in multiple forms. Thus,

it appeared that children used the strategy of copying their peer's action to find “the means to the desired ends in the opportunities opened up by the situation” (DUBET, 1996, p. 123).

It is important to emphasize, however, that children's actions were all the more present as the environment in the early childhood education institution (in its relational dimension) provided and allowed choices. This ratifies the understanding that children's participation in situations that relate to the construction of their own experiences is conditioned (although not absolutely) by limits that are given by the adults who organize the relational contexts of education and care.

In the scope of the empirical study, perceiving the experiences of the children was still possible, especially those experiences that took place within the early childhood education institution, and were strongly determined by a principle of *continuity* (BENJAMIN, 1918/1989) that interconnected them to other experiences by means of distinct moments and social spaces. During another event, we could see how the children, in decorating a Mother's Day card—an activity initially proposed by the teacher—were mobilizing different actions and recursive temporalities that showed ways of expressing the significance of this situation experienced within the early childhood education institution:

The children were preparing a card for Mother's Day. Professor Bruna had planned the activity in two moments: first, a finger painting of a heart done by the children and, after drying, the heart-shaped card would be glued to a flower-shaped folding suspended by a popsicle stick. As they were already distracted, the teacher, after negotiating with the class, interrupted the activity and suggested that they choose some toys while the ink of the cards dried. Ana, then, said to the teacher, “Bruna? I don't want to play! I want it all!”

The teacher looked at the girl and, without much understanding, asked, “How so? Everything what?”

Ana said, “Everything, Bruna! I want to prepare the card!” The teacher then allowed the girl finish her card.

Ana sat alone for about twenty-five minutes finishing off her card while the other children in the class played freely around the room, even after the teacher explained that after the game, they would finish their cards. The girl refused numerous invitations from her colleagues, who insisted on calling her to play. Ana sat and concentrated on preparing her card. (Notes from field notebook, 05/11/2012).

Ana's action expressed her total involvement in the situation through the creation of an object with strongly affectionate dimensions. At that time, she decided to isolate herself from the group. Her whole body was decorating the card. Her body language as



she continued sitting there making the card while her other classmates played revealed her anticipation of that experience—Ana, without a doubt, was imagining the possibilities to be later experienced at the moment of delivering the card to her mother.

Following this episode, it was interesting to note the teacher's attempt at interpreting the child's speech. After giving the paints back to Ana so she could continue decorating her card, the teacher, Bruna, looked at the researcher and said in a confessional tone, "It is very difficult to interpret what the children say!" Although it is not a simple task, it becomes necessary that early childhood educators become more sensitive to the ways that children are affected by their experiences in different everyday moments and situations, thus understanding how children attribute feelings to the world. This sensitivity can become the motto for the construction of practical pedagogical model filled with feelings for both children and adults. It would allow older people to understand situations lived by children and, in fact, touch them (LARROSA, 2002), thereby becoming a relevant element for the proposition of a curriculum organized around children's experiences. These practices bring children and their relationships (with adults, with peers, with aspects of the physical and social world) into the center of the pedagogical process and in early childhood education, giving learning opportunities for both older and younger people.

The episode revealed a fragmentation in the activity, since different production stages of the commemorative Mother's Day card (e.g., cutting out the heart silhouette, making the fold that transformed the shape into a flower displaying the message) had been completed by the teacher. Only some parts of the process were produced by the children themselves, such as the fingerpainting, the gluing of the message, and the placing of the popsicle stick. Equally, it is important to ponder that the proposal to decorate the card to give to their mothers was conceived of by the teacher without previously discussing it with the children. Practices like these make it impossible to understand the place of experience in early childhood education curriculum since it does not recognize children's autonomous and creative actions.

To Rech (2006, p. 64) this kind of curriculum organization "consists of previously thinking about all the activities that the children will do, arrange them with times, sequences and necessary materials, and then performing them in everyday life, is not consistent with the current conceptions of a childhood pedagogy." The considerations of Rech allow it to be inferred that promoting a curriculum organization

based on planning situations that do not address the developmental needs of children hinders the understanding and recognition of a potential alternative curriculum proposal based on experience and developed upon teacher's observation and registration of the situations experienced by children in their games and interactions.

Thus, such an activity would not be considered *a priori* as a field of experience, but it takes on potential relevance as the children express their expectations of living the experience of delivering the Mother's Day card. That is, children expand the fields of experiences from the way they put meaning on the present action, articulating it to situations lived in other social spaces, with other subjects, and in different times (past or present). The recognition of this particularity of children's experience, when associated with an activity conceived, planned, and presented to the children by the teachers, allows the construction of new pedagogical practices that includes dialogue with the children. This dialogue would motivate a paradigm shift in curriculum planning and produce an education based on democracy and respect for childhood otherness.

In this way, it is necessary to consider that the complexity around authentic practices for children to express the experiences that touch them increases even more when the focus is extended to other children who also decorated their cards. Other children, in ways different from those expressed by Ana, also demonstrated involvement in making affection-filled objects to be delivered to their mothers. Paula Beatriz, for example, upon finishing the decoration of her card, exclaimed with a smile of pride to the researcher, "Sandro, look at the card that I'm going to give to my mom!" (register of field filming, 05/11/2012). Marcus, also in a unique way, expressed interest in the activity and seemed to associate it with the possible experiences when later delivering the card to his mother:

Marcus finishes preparing the first part of his card and goes to play, at the request of the teacher, so that his painting dries up and he returns to the completion of the card. As he heads to the toy box, the boy picks up a telephone and starts an (imaginary) conversation with his mother:

"Hello, Mom? I'm preparing you a card! I'll give it to you when I get there, ok? Goodbye, love you." (Notes from the field notebook, 05/11/2012)

Ana, Paula Beatriz, and Marcus demonstrated (each in their own way) unique forms of how the experience of making a card for their mothers was significant, as this was a situation loaded with affection and emotions that could be an experience magnified in the later delivery of the object.

In this way, the different forms of expressing the interconnectedness of the children's experiences in class activities with other situations that the children desired to experience later in the delivery of the card showed that the logic of subjectivation (DUBET, 1996) was established through the experimentation performed by the children according to the interaction that occurred. Similarly, the episode revealed that the principle of the *continuity* (BENJAMIN, 1918/1989) is a dimension of childhood experience that allowed the children to amplify the teacher's proposed situation.

Situations such as those described above revealed the different possibilities that children have of articulating, in a study of their socialization, different logics of action (DUBET, 1996), present in the organization of early childhood education curriculum. In a certain sense, the rhythms of the class incorporated the changes of path resulting from the interests and actions of the children themselves. In other words, it was evident that in the studied institution, a system of action in which adults and children meet daily, children were offered a time/space for their actions to acquire meanings, sometimes going toward, sometimes moving away from, what was initially proposed by the teacher. In this example, the potential of the curriculum by fields of experience does not lie in its previous organization, but in the possibility of observation, registration, interpretation, and constant dialogue, within the scope of planning, with the experiences (past, present, and future) in which children live within the wider social context.

This demonstrated that the fields of experiences that organize the early childhood curriculum cannot be treated as mere divisions of area or disciplinary components, conceived and established *a priori*, as the school structure has been historically accustomed to doing (FOCHI, 2015). Differently from what is advocated by the text of the National Curricular Common Base for Early Childhood Education, the fields of experience go beyond a mere curriculum organization. Children articulate the circumstances experienced in the institution to those previously experienced, and the foreseen situations or desired ones to be lived in future moments. Therefore, such fields need to be planned by careful observation of the children's actions, speech, and gestures and not by mere *aprioristic* supposition, nor by pedagogical practices marked by *spontaneity*. When shedding light on children's actions and interactions, it is understood that the fields of experience often emerge from the relationships that they establish with the world around them.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This paper aimed at analyzing how children's speech and actions disclose infinite possibilities of thinking about curriculum driven by legal prerogatives—that they consider the children's experiences as a foundation for the organization and planning of contextualized learning situations (BRASIL, 2009).

The interlocution of childhood studies with Walter Benjamin's critical theory of culture, François Dubet's sociology of the experience, and early childhood education pedagogy showed the potential of children's actions, as well as the social experiences most beneficial for children. This theoretical key also made it possible to highlight those situations experienced by children that become potentially subject to expansion, obeying Benjamin's principle of continuity (1918/1989), and that can be converted into sensory-filled learning for the children and their teachers.

The production of social experiences through the combination of different logics allows children to produce signification processes about the world, either to legitimize their interpretations, to share their discoveries with their peers or adults, or to answer, cheat, or subvert cultural codes, norms, and values. This demonstrates how difficult it is for researchers (or for teachers and other early childhood education professionals) to identify which action of a child's to register and use to guide behavior. To Dubet, the analytical exercise that should be undertaken consists of “moving from the experience to the system,” identifying the different logics of normative behavior orientation present in the social system through how the actors articulate and synthesize them both in the individual action plane and in the collective action field (DUBET, 1996, p. 112). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the activity of the children themselves—that is, how they combine and articulate the different logics with which they are faced when aiming at designing a curriculum centered around children's social experiences.

It is important to emphasize that the organization of a curriculum based on fields of experience demands the understanding of the heterogeneity that guides the conduct of adults and children in the early childhood education environment. It encompasses the institutional regulation and the broader set of legislation constituting the juridical order to peer relations and the child-based experiences in other moments and social spaces. Recognizing this heterogeneity of principles regulating children's behaviors means understanding

children as individuals who are “always in a kind of interval, in a mixed space, intermediate to several logics” (DUBET, 1996, p. 112) and, therefore, capable of producing their own experiences. Moreover, we must create interpretive lenses such as those found in Walter Benjamin’s critical theory of culture that allow us to identify the specificities of the childhood experience, so long as it makes the differentiation of those experienced by adults possible, and produces a radicalization process of childhood otherness.

The explicitness and understanding of the children’s experiences within the institution of care and education are important factors for the sensitization process of early childhood education professionals and researchers. Experience-based curriculum, which has progressively constructed the early childhood education area in Brazil, has a structure that articulates and combines the languages with which children relate in their daily life with the situations lived by them in the broader social context, assuming a greater teaching role in its formulation to the extent of requiring different logic than those with a closed curriculum, organized by educational content (SACRISTÁN, 2000).

It is a conception of curriculum that enables nursery and preschool teachers to learn with children about the different, extraordinary, singular, and unexpected, emphasizing the importance of curriculum organization without, however, centralizing it on the disciplinary order characteristic of subsequent levels of elementary education (RECH, 2006). A field-of-experience curriculum demands understanding children as agents—that is, as subjects capable of indicating paths and facing challenges. In this process, the teacher has a difficult task: to recognize children’s potential without disregarding their uniqueness in terms of development.

Regarding curriculum organization and planning, so that the central axis of pedagogical practices are the specifics that involve the processes of constituting children as human beings and constructing knowledge from and for boys and girls, it is essential to exercise singularization in the experience of children and childhood in the present. Discussing a curriculum based on the experiences of children presumes considering the tension “between education’s norms and the contingency of where childhood takes place. Beyond a set of meanings, the expression of the educational experience seems to have a more open, and less conforming character, than the experiential education,” typical of traditional curriculum (ROCHA & BUSS-SIMÃO, 2018, p. 31). In other words, a curriculum that is based on

observing children's perceptions implies considering the educational experience to be an integral part of the sociocultural experiences of children and not a disciplinary fragmentation and rationalization of life and their own educational experience.

In short, to recognize the existence of such fields and their emergence from the speech and actions of the children themselves implies, in a certain sense, an insightful and precise interpretation on the part of adult who relate to children in the perspective of reading. This perspective considers the sense that Geertz (1973/1989) gives to the word: to produce an interpretation about what children experience in relation to the world around them. In other words, it is necessary to understand the specific ways in which children inform us about their experiences.

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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, research data are interpreted from the concept of social experience by François Dubet (1996) as a way to contribute to the debate on the curriculum of early childhood education.

<sup>3</sup> It is necessary to consider that this whole process of legitimizing the rights of children aged zero to six to attend nurseries and preschools derives from the actions of social movements that have claimed since the 1970s the social importance of early childhood education institutions (CURY, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> For example, educational experiences of some Italian cities, such as Reggio Emilia and San Miniato, some Belgian and Swedish communities (HADDAD, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> For further reading on the scope and limits of the National Curricular Common Base for Basic Education, see Campos & Barbosa (2015).

<sup>6</sup> Although not initially developed with the aim of educating children from zero to six years, these educational movements were (and still are) conceptual references for the formulation of curricular proposals for nurseries and preschools. Recently, the area has incorporated new and equally motivating experiences from different European countries, mainly from northern Italy (HADDAD, 2010; FOCHI, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> According to Dubet (1996), classical sociology is not a stream of sociological thought but a set of ideas and representations that cross different research traditions; it is strongly associated with Durkheim, Elias, and Parsons's theories.

<sup>8</sup> Considering the density of this author's work, the theoretical effort undertaken here is taken as a way of clarifying the still unclear notion of what in our country is conceived by fields of experience. For a review of the potential of Benjamin's work for early childhood education, see Santos (2015).

<sup>9</sup> The option to operate throughout the study with the idea of "taste" in the sense of capturing "what children like" is in opposition to ideas such as "child preference" and "child choice" because the word "taste" embraces the dimensions (aesthetic, affection, symbolism, nonrepresentational, and unintentional) that best fit the subtle complexity that surrounds childhood social relations.

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