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# CONTRIBUTION OF PSYCHOLOGISTS' WORK TO PROMOTE DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT**

Early Childhood Education (ECE) aims to promote comprehensive child development through the support of various areas. To this end, we sought to identify the psychologists' practices working in ECE, as well as the skills and competencies required of them, and how they perceive their contribution to promote early childhood development. This is a qualitative study, the sample consisted of six psychologists affiliated with different educational systems, who answered a semi-structured interview. Content analysis revealed that they worked collaboratively with staff and families, requiring skills and competencies such as active listening and the ability to promote dialogue, as well as theoretical knowledge of child development and mastery of the guidelines that guide practice. In light of the Bioecological Model of Human Development, we discuss the role of psychology within different microsystems and mesosystems in promoting children's proximal processes.

**Keywords:** psychologist performance; school psychology; childhood development

## Contribuciones de la actuación de psicólogas para promoción del desarrollo en el Educación Infantil

**RESUMEN**

La Educación Infantil (EI) tiene como finalidad la promoción del desarrollo integral infantil, a partir del suporte de distintas áreas. En ese sentido, Se buscó identificar las prácticas de psicólogas que actúan en la EI, así como las habilidades y competencias que le son requeridas, y como perciben su contribución para la promoción del desarrollo en la primera infancia. Se trata de un estudio cualitativo, cuya muestra se compuso por seis psicólogas vinculadas a diferentes redes de enseñanza, las cuales contestaron a una entrevista semiestructurada. El análisis de contenido apuntó que ellas actuaban en colaboración con el equipo y las familias, siendo requeridas habilidades y competencias, tales como la escucha activa y la capacidad de promover diálogo, además de conocimientos teóricos sobre el desarrollo infantil y dominio sobre las directrices que nortean la práctica. A la luz de la Teoría Biotecnológica del Desarrollo Humano discute-si el papel de la Psicología junto a diferentes microsistemas y mesosistemas para la promoción de los procesos proximales infantiles.

**Palabras clave:** actuación del psicólogo; psicología escolar; desarrollo infantil

## Contribuição da atuação de psicólogas para a promoção do desenvolvimento na Educação Infantil

**RESUMO**

A Educação Infantil (EI) tem como finalidade a promoção do desenvolvimento integral infantil, a partir do suporte de distintas áreas. Nesse sentido, buscou-se identificar as práticas de psicólogas que atuam na EI, assim como as habilidades e competências que lhe são requeridas e como percebem sua contribuição para a promoção do desenvolvimento na primeira infância. Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, cuja amostra foi composta por seis psicólogas vinculadas a diferentes redes de ensino, as quais responderam a uma entrevista semiestruturada. A análise de conteúdo revelou que elas atuavam em colaboração com a equipe e as famílias, sendo requeridas habilidades e competências, tais como a escuta ativa e a capacidade de promover diálogo, além de conhecimentos teóricos sobre o desenvolvimento infantil e domínio sobre as diretrizes que norteiam a prática. À luz da Teoria Bioecológica do Desenvolvimento Humano discute-se o papel da Psicologia junto a diferentes microssistemas e mesossistemas para a promoção dos processos proximais infantis.

**Palavras-chave:** atuação do psicólogo; psicologia escolar; desenvolvimento infantil

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## INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the first stage of Basic Education and encompasses daycare and preschool, whose target audience is babies and children from four months to five years and eleven months of age. ***Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional*** – LDB (Law No. 9394/96) indicates the full development of the person as one of the objectives of Education and defines the purpose of ECE as the promotion of the holistic development of children in the physical, psychological, intellectual and social aspects, complementing the action of the family and the community (Brazil, 1996). Additionally, ***Base Nacional Comum Curricular*** - BNCC (Brazil, 2018) highlights as basic learning rights the right to live together, to play, to participate, to explore, to express oneself and to know oneself, emphasizing the importance of interaction with peers and reference adults and the articulation between the child's knowledge and the experiences of the school context.

According to the guidelines of ***Conselho Federal de Psicologia*** (CFP, 2019) and the ***Associação Brasileira de Psicologia Escolar e Educacional*** (ABRAPEE, 2020), the role of psychology in educational/school contexts, including ECE, aims to assist in promoting the full development of children, especially in the psychosocial aspect. Therefore, the professional must be connected with the different spheres of the school: students, educators, managers, families, the community, and public policies, in order to mediate social and institutional relations, as well as integrate the multidisciplinary team and develop actions to improve the quality of the teaching-learning process and collaborate in the construction of political-pedagogical projects (Brazil, 2019; CFP, 2019; Souza, Gomes, Checchia, Lara, & Roman, 2016).

Different studies report stimulating and protective educational and care environments in early childhood are associated with the promotion of lifelong physical and emotional health, academic and professional success, quality interpersonal relations, and overcoming socioeconomic barriers (Blewitt et al., 2018). However, despite recognized importance of the topic, studies on the contribution of psychology to child development in ECE are scarce, reinforcing dissonances between theory and practice. Among Brazilian publications, there is a prevalence of experience reports, most of which relate to academic internship experiences, highlighting different themes such as: school inclusion, support for the pedagogical team, and the family-school relation. There is also research that emphasizes the expectations of educators and psychologists regarding the presence of psychology in schools (Prudêncio, Gesser, Oltramari, & Cord, 2015). In theinternational literature, there is a variety of themes about child development in which the research context is daycare centers and preschools. Among them, socio-emotional learning, the teacher-child relationship, developmental disorders and children's mental health stand out, as well as the occupational health of teachers, in addition to the benefits of this educational stage for the following stages of schooling.

Bioecological Theory of Human Development (BTHD) has been recognized as a guiding line for the performance of psychology in schools, especially in the international scenario (Burns, 2011; Loftus-Rattan, Wrightington, Furey, & Case, 2021). For example, it makes up the tripod that guides the training and performance of school psychologists in the USA, together with evidence-based practices and supervision (Simon, Cruise, Huber, Swerdlik, & Newman, 2014).

According to Bronfenbrenner (2001), promotion of child development is inseparable from the context in which it occurs, and the daily interactions between the child and their close caregivers are important predictors of healthy development. Therefore, the role of psychology in mediating the relationships within ECE becomes prominent, aiming to encourage and strengthen stimulating and meaningful interactions for the child (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Tudge, Merçon-Vargas, Liang, & Payir, 2017). Thus, the alignment of theory with the provisions of legislation and technical guidelines in the field of School and Educational Psychology (SEP) is evident, which point to social responsibility in the pursuit of improving living conditions, working conditions, and relations among those involved in the educational process (ABRAPEE, 2020; Brazil, 1996; CFP, 2019).

Given the above, the objective of this study is to identify the practices of psychologists working in ECE institutions, as well as the skills and competencies required of them, and how they perceive their contribution to promoting child development in early childhood. Based on BTHD, the role of the different microsystems that make up the school context in child development will be discussed.

## METHOD

This is an exploratory-descriptive study, with a qualitative approach, which was approved by the Research Ethics Committee. This study was conducted with Human Beings from the Institute of Psychology, Social Service, Health and Human Communication at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, following the recommendations of the National Health Council (CNS, 2016). Six psychologists who had been working for at least one year in public and private ECE institutions in different municipalities of Rio Grande do Sul participated, drawn from a purposive sample and by indication defined by theoretical saturation (Creswell, 2021).

Through telephone contact, the research was presented and a link containing Informed Consent Form was sent. Acceptance was carried out through a question with a "yes" or "no" answer. Only those psychologists who chose the "yes" option proceeded to the interview stage. Subsequently, the semi-structured interview was scheduled, which included 12 topics covering the

objectives and implications of the participants' work, the adoption and influence of different theoretical frameworks, and the contribution of their work to promoting psychosocial development in early childhood. The interviews were conducted individually, via videoconference on the Google Meet platform, and recorded in audio and video, with an average duration of 40 minutes.

For evaluation, qualitative content analysis was adopted with categories defined ***posteriori*** (Bardin, 1977/2016). It began with the pre-analysis of the interviews through a floating reading of the speeches. This allowed for the initial organization of the material, which was examined as exhaustively as possible, in order to find the most representative and homogeneous elements relevant to the objectives of the study. Based on this, the material was explored, systematizing it into thematic units of recording. Next, the themes were regrouped into context units, considering the recurring elements.

Based on Bardin's principles (1977/2016), namely: homogeneous categories that included the themes from the previous stages; relevant to the theoretical framework chosen for the study analysis (BTHD); mutually exclusive; and that guaranteed objectivity and reliability (Bardin, 1977/2016), three categories and seven subcategories of analysis were established, presented in Table 1. The categories were submitted to analysis by two judges, achieving a concordance rate of 74%, which was obtained by considering the total number of agreements, divided by the sum of the total number of agreements to the total number of disagreements (Robson, 2002).

**Table 1.** Analysis Categories and Subcategories

| Categories | Subcategories |
|---|---|
| 1. Action Plan | 1.1 Interventions with the different microsystems of which the child is a part |
| | 1.2 Mediation of relations |
| | 1.3 Interventions focused on the child in their context |
| 2. Skills and competencies | 2.1 Personal skills and competencies |
| | 2.2 Theoretical knowledge and technical skills |
| 3. Contribution to psychosocial development in childhood | 3.1 Prevention of harm to child development |
| | 3.2 Promotion of child development |

**Source**: Research data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The psychologists interviewed were between 25 and 49 years old. Five of them worked in private institutions (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6) and one in a public institution (P2), located in the southern region of Brazil. The characterization of type of employment, length of service, and area of postgraduate studies is shown in Table 2.

The main contributions reported by the participants are related to practices in different contexts in which the child is involved (family, school, community), and to the mediation of the relations established within them, especially between educators and family members; educators and children; and staff members. In order to enable these actions, the skills and competencies highlighted were: presence, availability, flexibility, active listening, and the ability to dialogue with multiple interlocutors. Furthermore, the professionals sought to rely about a variety of theoretical knowledge to understand the phenomena intrinsic to child development, and to offer strategies and language accessible to families and the school staff. Legislation concerning Psychology and Education complemented the basis of practice, requiring constant updating. These findings will be discussed in detail through the categories and subcategories of analysis (Table 1) and in light of the BTHD.

### 1. Practice

The practice of psychology in ECE is usually marked by dialogue with the entire institution's team and by a close relation with the children and their families, taking into account the cultural and socioeconomic characteristics of the school community and the current Education policies (ABRAPEE, 2020; Prudêncio et al., 2015; Souza et al., 2016). Thus, the practice encompasses the four contextual levels proposed by the PPCT model - Process-Person-Context-Time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Tudge et al., 2017), namely: the environment where the individual is directly involved and where the most significant interactions occur (microsystem); the interaction between two or more environments, in which development occurs (mesosystem); the contexts in which one is not directly involved, but whose events reverberate in daily life or life course (exosystem); and the cultural and socioeconomic context of society (macrosystem). In this research, interventions with the microsystems of family, school, multidisciplinary network, and the mediation between the relatios established within them (mesosystem) were particularly examined.

The interviewees reported that they faced different requests, pressures, and organizational or temporal limitations, with small weekly workloads, as stated by P1, P4, and P5. In some contexts, there was greater resistance to their work, especially when they sought to act transversally with all those involved in the school setting. This reality corroborates the studies by Prudêncio et al. (2015) and Souza et al. (2016) about expectations of some teams for actions aimed at children with school-related complaints.

Table 2. Characterization of Participants

| | Age (years) | Type of institution | Number of schools | Years of activity | Affiliation | Postgraduate studies |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | 30 to39 | Private | 5 | 1 to 3 | Consultant | ECE |
| P2 | 30 to 39 | Public | 1 | 1 to 3 | Consultant | Psychoanalysis<br>Hospital Psychology |
| P3 | 40 to 49 | Private | 1 | 10 to 20 | Owner | Arts<br>Educational Management<br>Supervision and Guidance<br>Neuropsychology |
| P4 | 25 to 29 | Private | 5 | 1 to 3 | Consultant | Positive Psychology |
| P5 | 30 to 39 | Private | 1 | 5 to 10 | Employee (with CLT - Brazilian labor law) | Childhood and Adolescence |
| P6 | 30 to 39 | Private | 1 | 10 to 20 | Consultant | Childhood and Family<br>Psychopedagogy |

**Source**: Research data.

**1.1 Interventions with different microsystems of which the child is a part**

The indicated interventions aimed at promoting child development and occurred especially within the school and family microsystems. The multiple practices carried out in the school context stand out, which were summarized by P6, who has dedicated herself since graduation to the study and improvement of her performance at the school, being present at the institution daily:

> "I always follow up with the administration. They bring the demands. I conduct anamnesis with the families and assess the children's adaptation, I see if there are any issues. If there's a more difficult adaptation, I follow up even more closely. Sometimes, we call the family, accompany the child in the classroom, guide the teacher to find more constructive paths for that child. I'm always there in the classroom. So, any demand that arises, but even if there isn't a demand, I'm always circulating to see how they are doing" (P6).

In addition, team meetings and continuing education were mentioned as opportunities for dialogue, exchange of knowledge, and strengthening of the group. Bossi et al. (2017) emphasize that training, provided it has a reflective approach to theory and practice, allows educators to reinforce their self-image as the main agents responsible for their practice, acting as change agents to promote child development. P5 reports her experience:

> "I hold bi-weekly or monthly conversations and meetings with the team, depending on the context. This facilitates communication; we can talk about what is happening, what needs improvement, or about projects to put into practice. When this doesn't happen, I notice that the group becomes more anxious, more agitated" (P5).

Regarding listening to the educators, the welcoming of their demands and assistance in planning actions with specific children or classes stood out: "Being able to listen to the teachers, to the anxiety they have regarding that child or class that is having difficulties, and to bring some very specific interventions. I think this support is important" (P2). This practice is relevant because the interactions that occur within the classroom microsystem, such as: eating, face-to-face activities, group or solitary play, reading, and problem-solving are capable of promoting proximal processes, enabled by engagement in reciprocal and bidirectional interactions of the child with their caregivers and/or objects and symbols whose contact is stable and lasting (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner, 2001). Thus, it is evident that projects focused on improving the interactive skills of the educator generate satisfactory results for child development (Sheridan et al., 2022; Werner, Linting, Vermeer, & Van Ijzendoorn, 2016).

It is known that children's development is enhanced when families are involved in their school efforts (Bronfenbrenner, 2002; Sheridan et al., 2022; Smith, Holmes, Romero, & Sheridan, 2022). The participants' involvement with the family microsystem begins from the first contact with the institution, an opportune moment to learn about the child's and their family's history and explain the school's dynamics, which leads to greater parental confidence and strengthens the family-school bond. Furthermore, meetings and group discussions provide a space for mutual identification and connection with the school community. According to P3, who is also the institution's director, informal moments, such as contact at the beginning or end of the day, are

valuable for strengthening the bond with families:

> "I have a habit of taking the children to the gate and greeting them, so that sometimes in a quick chat at the gate I can raise some issues with the family. I believe it's a frequent conversation. It's about gathering information from the families' context before the problem arises" (P3).

Considering that proximal processes are triggered by involvement in activities in which the adult adapts available resources and expands the child's potential over time, when parents are encouraged to observe their child and feel competent to respond appropriately to their demands, the child will be able to do progressively more complex things (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner, 2002). According to Marvin, Moen, Knoche, and Sheridan (2020), the first step in empowering families would be to encourage interactions between parents and children, affirming the competencies of each member and the group as a whole.

**1.2 Mediation of Relations**

What occurs in the mesosystem is a predictor of good outcomes in child development, since this contextual level is highly responsive to the quality of relations established among the microsystems surrounding the child (Sheridan et al., 2022). According to Smith et al. (2022), most mesosystemic interventions take place between family and educator, which was evidenced by the participants. However, these interactions occurred with different approaches and were planned according to the openness of the institution. P6 stated: "I do the sessions with the teacher together to strengthen this family bond. Then communication also ends up being better" (P6). P1, who works in five institutions for about one shift a week, reported that she usually makes visual interventions with posters and photos in the environment to bring families closer to the school: "It is rare for teachers to talk to parents. I think it would be a very powerful and important thing that psychology could help mediate" (P1).

The lack of continuous programs recognized by the school community can hinder the adherence of families and educators to the proposals made by the psychologists. P4 reports this difficulty: "Maybe it won't give the result you expect. So, I see it as a daily challenge to understand that sometimes it will take time for some people to mature this idea." The time of resistance can negatively impact child development, making preventive actions unfeasible.

Studies about evidence-based practices demonstrate that projects adopted continuously and collaboratively with all families have a positive impact on children's development and skills (Loftus-Rattan et al., 2021; Marvin et al. 2020). An example of this is the Multi-Tiered System of Supports - MTSS (Loftus-Rattan et al., 2021), a US program that, aiming to prevent difficulties and promote child development, offers training to caregivers, paying attention to the needs of each child.

**1.3 Child-Centered Interventions in their Context**

Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) propose that the form, power, content, and direction of proximal processes vary according to the characteristics of the developing person and their immediate (microsystem) and more remote (macrosystem, exosystem) environment. In line with this, it was found that the participants worked with the different microsystems and mesosystems of which the children were a part, aiming to monitor their development, which made it possible to identify resources and disconnections between the systems that could lead to childhood symptoms and difficulties (Pintor, 2020). According to P1, it is necessary to "know how this child's development was until she/he arrived at school, in order to be able to monitor the child and understand the family, what their context is."

Additionally, classroom observation helped in the dynamic understanding of the demands brought by educators and families in relation to the children. Joint projects were implemented with the educational team within the group of children. Proposals focused on socio-emotional development and school transitions were mentioned by the participants. P5, who works in ECE only one shift per week, reported:

> "We have the socio-emotional project with all the classes. What I can't get into and put into practice, the teacher does. I always coordinate with her what will be done. I supervise with the teacher, but I always go into the classrooms to observe the children. I joke that I need to know who I'm talking about, who that child is" (P5).

Entry into and exit from ECE are moments that deserve attention, as normative or non-normative transitions in the life course can trigger interruptions in proximal processes and learning journeys, making it necessary to have strategies that ensure continuity between the two stages (Tudge, Navarro, Merçon-Vargas, & Payir, 2021). In P2's experience in the public sector, it was her participant observation that brought to light connections between the levels of education: "Why don't the children who are leaving here visit the other school? Because it's next door. And nobody had ever thought about that."

**2. Skills and Competencies**

The concept of competence encompasses the combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that impact professional performance (Brandão et al., 2008). Santos, Menezes, Borba, Ramos, and Costa (2017) reviewed the literature in search of a mapping of competencies of school psychologists and found more than 40 indications, with interdisciplinary work, the promotion of spaces for dialogue, and a critical stance being the most frequently mentioned.

For the participants in this research, presence, availability, openness, and flexibility would be the main competencies that would enable active listening and the establishment of dialogue with the school community. These skills, along with theoretical and technical knowledge, have an impact on the academic, social, and behavioral development of children (Brofenbrenner, 2002; Smith et al., 2022).

**2.1 Personal Skills and Competencies**

The presence, as a posture of being fully present in daily interactions, was recurrent in the participants' statements, as was the availability to participate in school moments and situations. Andrada (2005) reinforces that a posture of not-knowing, combined with curiosity that questions what is normalized, allows the psychologist to be sensitive to all segments of the educational system. For P1, the posture assumed is, in itself, a way of intervening, which she named "transmission through experience": "A transmission through experience, wishing that the way I am positioning myself with the children and with people is already a guide, without me having to say 'look what I'm doing here'" (P1).

P4 highlighted presence and availability: "This presence gives you another skill, which is openness. Many families appear; each one has its own context. Openness to understand what the values of these families are, so as not to override them." P5 adds: "I think the main thing is active listening. Being present there in the moment with the person – body, mind, everything present." These statements refer to one of the premises of psychology's work in the school context, which is the welcoming of the cultural diversity of the school community (ABRAPEE, 2020; CFP, 2019). To this end, it is necessary to pay attention to one's own socio-emotional skills, such as empathy and social awareness, which are fundamental for working with children and families with diverse origins and realities (Burns, 2011). P6 highlighted the importance of flexibility:

> "The first thing you have to have is flexibility because the psychologist who is inside the school must act in a way that allows them to be a psychologist in various ways, in the hallway, at the door, in the playground, on the floor with the children" (P6).

In their ethical commitment to welcoming the school community, the psychologist must start from the understanding that the difficulty presented by an individual is likely linked to the different systems that surround them (Burns, 2011; Werner et al., 2016). Therefore, acting to ensure that communication occurs appropriately among people is an essential competence of the professional.

**2.2 Theoretical Knowledge and Technical Skills**

It was found that the participants sought a variety of theoretical foundations to guide the understanding of phenomena, offering strategies on how to do so. The most mentioned theory was Psychoanalysis, and Winnicott was the most indicated theorist, followed by Bowlby. In addition, their keen observation of the expected acquisitions at each stage of development allowed them to assess children in their uniqueness, considering the context in which they were inserted, in order to intervene preventively, either through actions to be implemented with the educator and/or family, or through referrals to specialized professionals (ABRAPEE, 2020; CFP, 2019; Pintor, 2020).

The participants also highlighted that using accessible language with families and teams facilitated the connection between what they proposed and its application at home and at school: "We need to bring this polished scientific content into a simpler language" (P6). They also mentioned references on how to intervene, such as Nonviolent Communication and Positive Discipline: "I have been using positive discipline a lot, which has helped because it is a very simple language that offers techniques and reflection about the posture that would be most appropriate to manage children's education" (P6).

Through supervision, study groups, and complementary training, the participants indicated that they are constantly updating themselves on the technical, scientific, and legislative literature of psychology and Education. However, P2, P3, and P6 highlighted that they felt a lack of guidelines that would show them what theoretical and technical knowledge was necessary to work in ECE, which generated anxiety in the face of the demands they encountered.

Although the BTHD was not mentioned by the psychologists, its potential to guide the work of psychology and Education professionals in schools is highlighted. By understanding the dynamics of the family microsystem and past history, professionals can provide an environment sensitive to the child's difficulties and resources in their socialization process, in a way that is stimulating to exploration and the formation of bonds (Bronfenbrenner, 2002; Tudge et al., 2017).

**3. Contribution to Supporting Development**

In their work in ECE, the psychologists sought to employ a cross-cutting approach within the school community, without losing sight of understanding individual and family needs (Souza et al., 2016). Encouraging the active participation of families in the planning of school actions is paramount for the lasting impact of interventions (Bronfenbrenner, 2002).

**3.1 Prevention of Developmental Problems in Children**

By working in ECE, integrated with other education professionals and intervening with families and the school team, the psychologist contributes to prevention

of problems in child development, benefits of which can last for years in the individual's life (Werner et al., 2016). In this direction, P5 reports: "I think that psychology brings a healthier perspective to the institution. So, for me, the main thing is to monitor the child's development and work on prevention, before something happens."

In general, the participants agreed that acting preventively consisted of intervening with micro and mesosystems. The empowerment of educators is highlighted by P4: "So that they also understand about development, what is expected, what would be a warning sign within the phase." The approach to families was mentioned by P2: "We noticed that parents brought their children more relaxed, right? Because when you have relaxed parents, you have more relaxed children."

### 3.2 Promoting Child Development

It was found that one of the main contributions of psychology to the promotion of child development was the creation of collaborative family-school strategies. For P6, it is important to foster the autonomy of the school community, which, equipped with knowledge about child development and interpersonal relations, would be able to manage its challenges and conduct assertive actions: "At school we have a duty to bring the knowledge of psychology so that teachers appropriate it, so that it stays there and continues to flourish there, so that we don't leave and the knowledge leaves with us" (P6).

Although the relevance of the family-school relation is well-established in literature (Andrada, 2005; Sheridan et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022), few studies point to ways to develop effective interventions, a gap that has been highlighted as described by the participants. P5 illustrates: "I learned the technique itself through practice, not from books. For example, there are many references to the stages of development. But the technique itself, I learned more through trial and error in practice, you know?"

Considering that the focus on promoting children's psychosocial development is advocated in the national guidelines that guide the work of psychologists in schools (ABRAPEE, 2020; CFP, 2019) and in the parameters of the Education field (Brazil, 1996, Brazil, 2018), it is observed that many of  indicated premises are consistent with the BTHD, which understands that child development results from the interaction of the child with caregivers and peers from different systems (micro-meso-macro-exo-cross-system) in which they are inserted. When the people who make up the systems closest to the child (family and school) act in harmony and continuously offer interactional opportunities with progressively increasing complexity, new learning is acquired and child development is promoted (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Acting to ensure that this harmony occurs and is maintained was identified as one of the main focuses of the practices of the participants in this study.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study sought to identify the practices of psychologists working in ECE institutions, the skills and competencies required of them, and how they perceive their contribution to promoting child development in early childhood. It was verified that the main contributions of this work occur within the microsystems and among the mesosystems that make up the child's school life. However, the psychologist's actions in the school should not be limited to these aspects. Contributions at the macrosystem level include changes inside and outside the school, whether by encouraging a culture of mental health from the beginning of life or by actively participating in school decision-making processes and public policies. Based on these premises, it is possible to achieve the ethical purpose of work in ECE, acting as an agent of change to guarantee the right to healthy development for all children (ABRAPEE, 2020; CFP, 2019).

Despite gaps observed in training in the field of psychology to work with school institutions (Pintor, 2020), the interviewees indicated that the technical guidelines (ABRAPEE, 2020; CFP, 2019) provided support for their practice. In any case, evidence-based models are still incipient in Brazil, which reverberates in insecurities experienced by professionals, especially when they begin their foray into ECE, which suggests that future studies could evaluate the effectiveness of programs and interventions that have been implemented. Such scientific effort could support public policies aimed at promoting child development, with long-term effects at the individual and macro-systemic levels.

It is noteworthy that the methodological procedures adopted culminated in a delimitation of participants from the same region of the country. Thus, the results reflect the characteristics of the performance of the participating professionals, and it is necessary that new studies expand the sample to encompass the scenario of psychology in Brazilian ECE. Furthermore, it is emphasized that the BTHD was adopted only in the data analysis stage, not underpinning the methodological conception of the study. However, it is believed that the theory enriched the discussion by emphasizing the relevance of the connection between the child's immediate contexts and the proximal, motor processes of child development (Tudge et al., 2021).

In any case, it is believed that this study advances discussions regarding the role of psychology in ECE, providing data about professional paths, the challenges of practice, and the skills needed to work with the multiple systems that make up the school. By developing the personal and technical skills and competencies presented in this study, the work of the psychology professional will make it possible to problematize the demands of ECE and ensure the autonomy of families

and school teams in awareness and decision-making for the prevention and promotion of child development. Thus, the results presented may be useful for the initial and continuing training of psychologists working in ECE, in addition to enabling the improvement of practice. Perhaps they could also reinforce the necessary implementation of Law 13.935 (2019), given the imperative shortage of psychologists in schools and the precariousness of services due to the habitually low contracted working hours.

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**Authors contribution**

**Samanta Cristina Wessel:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft
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