

Curricular Policies for Early Childhood Education: Global Influences and Local Translations in Brazil and Portugal

Políticas Curriculares para a Educação Infantil: influências globais e traduções locais no Brasil e Portugal

Políticas curriculares para la educación infantil: influencias globales y adaptaciones locales en Brasil y Portugal

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Abstract

This study analyzes the influence of international organizations on Early Childhood Education curriculum policies in Brazil and Portugal, investigating how global guidelines are interpreted and recontextualized in the construction of national curricula. The research adopts a qualitative approach, bibliographic in nature and articulated with documentary analysis of the national curriculum policies of both countries — the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) and the Curricular Guidelines for

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Preschool Education (OCEPE) — grounded in Ball's Policy Cycle (2011, 2022), and attentive to the historical, political, and economic specificities of each context. The results reveal that, although they share converging historical trajectories, Brazil and Portugal differ in their degree of autonomy in the elaboration of educational policies. A growing articulation between curriculum policies and international guidelines is observed, with emphasis on skills development, curriculum standardization, and alignment with global market demands. The study contributes to the debate on educational policy formulation by highlighting the contradictions of the BNCC, the persistent fragmentation of Early Childhood Education, and the need to strengthen democratic and culturally situated perspectives capable of resisting the homogenizing pressures of global capitalism.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education; Curriculum Policies; International Organizations; Globalization; Base Nacional Comum Curricular (BNCC); Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa a influência de organismos internacionais nas políticas curriculares da Educação Infantil no Brasil e em Portugal, investigando como as diretrizes globais são interpretadas e recontextualizadas na construção de currículos nacionais. A pesquisa adota abordagem qualitativa, de caráter bibliográfico e articulada à análise documental das políticas curriculares nacionais dos dois países — a Base Nacional Comum Curricular (BNCC) e as Orientações Curriculares para a Educação Pré-escolar (OCEPE) — fundamentada no Ciclo de Políticas de Ball (2011, 2022), e atenta às especificidades históricas, políticas e econômicas de cada contexto. Os resultados revelam que, embora compartilhem trajetórias históricas convergentes, Brasil e Portugal diferem quanto ao grau de autonomia na elaboração de políticas educativas. Observa-se uma crescente articulação entre as políticas curriculares com diretrizes internacionais, com ênfase no desenvolvimento de competências, padronização curricular e alinhamento às demandas do mercado global. O estudo contribui para o debate sobre formulação de políticas educacionais ao destacar as contradições da BNCC, a persistente fragmentação da Educação Infantil e a necessidade de fortalecer perspectivas democráticas e culturalmente situadas, capazes de resistir às pressões homogeneizadoras do capitalismo global.

Palavras-chave: Educação Infantil; Políticas Curriculares; Organismos Internacionais; Globalização; Base Nacional Comum Curricular; Orientações Curriculares para a Educação Pré-escolar.

Resumen

Este estudio analiza la influencia de las organizaciones internacionales en las políticas curriculares de Educación Infantil en Brasil y Portugal, investigando cómo se interpretan y recontextualizan las directrices globales en la construcción de los currículos nacionales. La investigación adopta un enfoque cualitativo, de carácter bibliográfico y articulado con el análisis documental de las políticas curriculares nacionales de ambos países: la Base Curricular Común Nacional (BCCN) y las Directrices Curriculares para la Educación Preescolar (OCPE), fundamentado en el Ciclo de Políticas de Ball (2011, 2022) y atento a las especificidades históricas, políticas y económicas de cada contexto. Los resultados revelan que, si bien comparten trayectorias históricas convergentes, Brasil y Portugal difieren en su grado de autonomía en la elaboración de políticas educativas. Se observa una creciente articulación entre las políticas curriculares y las directrices internacionales, con énfasis en el desarrollo de competencias, la estandarización curricular y la alineación con las demandas del mercado global. El estudio contribuye al debate sobre la formulación de políticas educativas al destacar las contradicciones del BNCC, la persistente fragmentación de la Educación Infantil y la necesidad de fortalecer perspectivas democráticas y culturalmente situadas capaces de resistir las presiones homogeneizadoras del capitalismo global.

Palabras clave: Educación Infantil; Políticas Curriculares; Organizaciones Internacionales; Globalización; Base Nacional Común Curricular (BNCC); Directrices Curriculares para la Educación Infantil.

Introduction

Curricular policies for Early Childhood Education in Brazil and Portugal have been profoundly influenced by the process of economic and educational globalization. In Portugal, this influence grew stronger in the 1970s, driven by the country's transition to democracy and its integration into the European Economic Community. In Brazil, the movement gained momentum during the redemocratization of the 1980s and intensified in the 1990s, under the influence of neoliberal policies and pressures from international organizations.

Globalization has reshaped educational policies, steering them towards creating a skilled workforce able to adapt to emerging technologies. This reconfiguration is grounded in alternative concepts of childhood. Qvortrup (2010) highlights that the belated recognition of children as social agents stems from the historical marginalization of this age group and from traditional views that treat childhood merely as a preparatory stage for adulthood.

This aspect is key to grasping how policies often perpetuate instrumental views of education, particularly when shaped by international organizations that give precedence to economic results over the unique aspects of child development. Despite increasing pressure for fiscal adjustments and economic reforms, the actions of these organizations continue to intensify, largely due to the influence of the World Bank (BM) and the International Monetary Fund (FMI).

Educational policies are influenced by the inclusion of organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCDE), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which is facilitated through technical cooperation, recommendations, and external evaluations. Research conducted by Durli in 2020 found that educational policies in both Brazil and Portugal have been influenced, resulting in their curriculum being aligned with the OCDE's prioritized competencies. In Brazil, this is evident in the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), whereas in Portugal, it is evident in the Curricular Guidelines for Preschool Education (OCEPE).

Researchers like Campos (2008) and Rosemberg (2002) argue that the growth of Early Childhood Education has frequently been linked with a decrease in public funding, leading to an "education for subalternity." This global movement connects Early Childhood Education with economic development through the lens of children as "future human capital" (Penn, 2002), which directly affects the creation of curricular policies.

Rosemberg (1996) notes that the inclusion of these organizations led to an expansion of policies through non-formal channels in addition to an instrumental view of childhood, which is supported by the notion that children in socially vulnerable positions should be the focus of compensatory policies.

Within this context, the present study aims to comprehend how national actors interpret, translate, or resist the guidelines of international organizations in the development of curricular policies for Early Childhood Education in Brazil and Portugal. We begin with the premise that these processes are influenced by the unique socioeconomic, historical, and institutional settings of each nation. The primary goal is to examine the impact of international organizations on the development of curriculum policies for early childhood, taking into account the specific characteristics of Brazil and Portugal.

This study is justified by the necessity to comprehend the effects of globalization on curricular policies for Early Childhood Education, with a focus on their direct implications for the educational experiences of children and their families. The research assesses the impact of international organizations on the development of these policies in Brazil and Portugal, taking into account the cultural and educational nuances of each country.

The Policy Cycle as an Analytical Tool in Early Childhood Education: Brazil and Portugal

The choice of Brazil and Portugal as case studies is justified by the converging paths of their historical development in democratization and education reform processes, which gained momentum in Portugal during the

1970s and in Brazil during the 1980s. The academic equivalence between the two settings was further established by the researcher's involvement in the International Mobility Program of the Postgraduate Program in Education at a federal public institution in southern Brazil.

The research into bibliographic sources took into account the historical, political, and economic backgrounds of both countries, drawing on authors including Campos (2008, 2013), Durli (2020), Macedo (2019), Kramer (2006), Oliveira-Formosinho (2009), Rosemberg and Mariano (2010), Vasconcelos (2000, 2011), and Vilarinho (2012).

The study is grounded in the idea that educational policies are influenced by power dynamics which aim to "produce subjects" through language and communication (Ball; Maguire; Braun, 2021, p. 79). Neoliberal policies, viewed as inherently non-neutral, are repeatedly reinterpreted by individuals within diverse settings, highlighting the contradictions and tensions inherent to crafting and enforcing public policy initiatives.

The documentary corpus comprises official Brazilian and Portuguese documents, including the National Common Curricular Base for Early Childhood Education (2017) from Brazil (2017) and the Curricular Guidelines for Preschool Education (1997, 2016) from Portugal (1997, 2016). They demonstrate global influences while also showcasing local characteristics.

The analysis uses the triangulation of bibliographic and documentary sources, structured according to Stephen Ball's Policy Cycle framework. The analytical process employs methods for examining the contexts of influence, policy text creation, and the context of practice, thereby facilitating the recognition of discrepancies and likenesses in the curricular policies of both countries and the impact of international organizations on the development of national policies.

Curriculum Policies for Early Childhood Education: Global Tensions

Disputes over educational policies for children in Brazil and Portugal go beyond national boundaries, driven by international organizations that promote the global implementation of policies. These disputes create a field of tensions in which opposing educational projects exist alongside one another.

The key historical events in Early Childhood Education on a global scale commenced with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (ONU, 1948), which designated education as a universal entitlement; followed by the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (ONU, 1959), which acknowledged the particular needs of children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (ONU, 1989) consolidated the right to free and quality education, with the World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990) subsequently incorporating early childhood development into educational agendas. The Dakar Framework for Action laid out objectives for the expansion of Early Childhood Education, ultimately resulting in the 2030 Agenda — SDG 4 (UNESCO, 2016), which specified universal access to Early Childhood Education as a global goal.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the ONU in 1989, serves as a significant international legal framework, yet it also embodies inherent contradictions arising from varying views on childhood. Rosemberg and Mariano (2010), Boyden (1997), and Soares (2005) state that the document outlines three categories of rights: protection, provision, and participation, and that these categories represent a clash between two approaches to child rights: protectionism, which focuses on the child's vulnerability and need for guidance, and autonomy, which prioritizes the child's self-governance and active involvement. The universal character of this concept is largely based on Western values, specifically the emphasis on individual rights, which may overlook cultural and contextual variations.

These tensions are also reflected in global educational policies. Kramer (2006) notes the conflict between compensating for social and economic disparities and acknowledging children's right to civic involvement. The conflict escalates in the presence of guidelines from international bodies, like the World Bank and the FMI, which generally view childhood from a perspective of productivity, and reduce it to a form of human capital to be trained.

The OCDE, UNESCO, and UNICEF directly shape the formulation of educational guidelines, guided by the logic of efficiency and efficacy, prioritizing learning that is geared towards the labor market. This is exemplified by PISA, the OCDE's Programme for International Student Assessment, which relies on technical data to inform public policy, prioritizing outcome-based approaches that overlook the cultural, social, and economic differences that shape childhoods. UNICEF maintains that investing in early childhood education yields superior outcomes in education, employability, and the decrease of social issues. As a result, children's rights are viewed in the context of a technical and economic framework.

Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2021) argue that the actions of these organizations are complex and involve global power dynamics and interests, necessitating a critical examination of curricular policies due to their potential for exploitation and early schooling. According to Campos (2013), since the 2000s, Early Childhood Education has primarily been perceived as a means to combat poverty, with a focus on nutrition, protection, and social inclusion, especially for children under three, thereby solidifying a fragmented perspective.

This study aims to examine how dominant discourses emerge in early childhood education policies in Brazil and Portugal, highlighting similarities, disparities, and the impact of international pressures on local settings.

Political Texts: Translations and Political Appropriations between Brazil and Portugal

Recent decades have brought about significant social and economic transformations that have led to structural changes in family organization, particularly in the areas of child education and care. Cunha (2005) attributes these changes primarily to the reorganization of family structures and the rise in women's involvement in the workforce, thus heightening the requirement to extend care and Early Childhood Education beyond the home environment.

Educational reforms aimed at childhood have been implemented in both Brazil and Portugal, yet these policies fall short of guaranteeing universal access and continue to perpetuate inequalities due to their welfare-based nature (Campos, 2013; Vilarinho, 2012). Reforms have adopted a compensatory approach to Early Childhood Education, viewing services as inadequate stand-ins for family care and primarily targeting the needs of working families.

Rosemberg (2002, p. 38) notes that the welfare-based approach led to the adoption of "mass service models" requiring a minimal investment of public funds, ultimately compromising both the breadth and the quality of care. The author also emphasizes the Brazilian feminist movement's significance in esteeming this educational stage, by connecting the call for nursery centers to the fight for gender equality. Similar connections between Early Childhood Education policies and female emancipation are also noted in the Portuguese context, as observed by Vilarinho (2012).

The policies for Early Childhood Education in these countries show how international ideas are adapted to suit local circumstances. This process involves intricate negotiations between parties, interests, and perceptions of childhood, extending beyond the straightforward implementation of external regulations. The level of autonomy in each country is influenced by its economic and political circumstances. Even though Portugal is part of the European Union, it still maintains a relatively significant degree of control over its decisions, whereas Brazil, being a developing country, is more financially reliant on international organizations, which restricts its independence and forces it to tailor its educational policies according to external priorities.

This tension between the global and the local is explicitly evident in curricular documents from both nations. In Brazil, the Brazilian National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) and in Portugal, the Curricular Guidelines for Preschool Education (OCEPE) demonstrate how the translation and implementation of educational policies are influenced by ideological debates. Disputes in this area involve both the inclusion of international agendas and the confirmation of local viewpoints on childhood, child development, and the social role of education. The analysis of these documents shows that each country has developed its own unique take on a globalized curriculum.

Brazil: Local Translations

The adoption of the 1988 Federal Constitution (Brasil, 1988) signified the integration of international human rights treaties into the Brazilian legal framework. The conversations that led to the approval of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) via Decree No. 99.710/1990 (Brasil, 1990a) and subsequently prompted the establishment of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA), which was implemented through Law No. 8.069/1990 (Brasil, 1990b). The ECA marked a departure from the old Minors' Code by embracing the Doctrine of Integral Protection, acknowledging children and adolescents as bearers of rights.

This legal framework expanded the conversations on childhood and impacted Early Childhood Education policies. Campos notes (2013) that, despite recent progress, transforming welfare-based Early Childhood Education into a fundamental child right necessitates its recognition as that, rather than solely a requirement for working families. Kramer (2006) reinforces the importance of specific training for professionals who work with children, although institutions still face challenges in ensuring adequate initial and continuing training.

Between 1993 and 1996, the National Policy for Early Childhood Education (PNEI) was developed, comprising the "documentos das carinhas"¹, which codified pedagogical, organizational, and administrative guidelines. According to Carvalho (2016), this collection of documents played a pivotal role in acknowledging Early Childhood Education as the initial phase of Basic Education, a recognition solidified by the LDB, Law No. 9.394/1996 (Brasil, 1996a). The LDB marked a turning point by transferring Early Childhood Education from Social Assistance to the Municipal Secretariats of Education, incorporating it into the educational system amidst neoliberal reforms driven by international organizations, which promoted budget rationalization and a resultant decrease in state responsibility.

In 1998, the National Curricular References for Early Childhood Education (RCNEI) were introduced, incorporating a proposal to guide pedagogical practices (Brasil, 1998). Critics from social movements and civil groups, however, argued that these documents were built with a centralized and non-participatory approach, and were imposed unilaterally by the federal government as a supposed promise of modernization at this stage. As a result, Resolution No. 1/1999 of the CNE/CEB introduced the National Curricular Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI), which were formulated in a more democratic manner (Brasil, 1999). The DCNEI represented an advancement by opposing early schooling, adopting a more holistic approach and prioritizing the comprehensive development of the child. Following this, CNE/CEB Resolution No. 5/2009 reaffirmed and updated these guidelines, representing a conceptual and pedagogical improvement over the previous document (Brasil, 2009).

To translate guidelines and policies into effective practices, adequate implementation conditions must be ensured, particularly in terms of public funding. A significant turning point was the enactment of Law No. 11.494/2007 (Brasil, 2007), which established the Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Basic Education and for the Valorization of Education Professionals (FUNDEB), thereby extending constitutional funding guarantees to all of Basic Education.

The inclusion of Early Childhood Education in FUNDEB was brought about by extraordinary civil society mobilizations, as seen in the "Painted Diapers Movement"², which employed innovative tactics, including "stroller-ins" and "rattle-ins", in the National Congress to push for the law's passage (Lima; Lima; Fontineles, 2021). As a result,

¹ The term "documentos das carinhas" refers to the covers of the publications, which featured drawings of children's faces representing different races and ethnicities, printed in black and white on a colored background; each with a distinct colour: Early Childhood Education Policy: Proposal (1993 - yellow cover); For a Policy for Training Early Childhood Education Professionals (1994 - pink cover); Early Childhood Education in Brazil: Current Situation (1994 - green cover); Early Childhood Education: Annotated Bibliography (1995 - red cover); Criteria for Nursery Service that Respects the Fundamental Rights of Children (1995 - blue cover); Pedagogical Proposals and Curriculum in Early Childhood Education (1996 - orange cover).

² The movement brought strollers, babies and rattles to the ramps of Congress and State Assemblies, as well as clotheslines with demands written on diapers, in the so-called "painted diapers movement", whose message was: "The struggle continues! No to setbacks!". Available at: <https://undime.org.br/noticia/fundeb-pra-valer-faz-ato-com-fraldas-pintadas-e-fala-em-audiencia-publica-na-camara>. Accessed on: September 19, 2025.

FUNDEB became a crucial tool for securing resources for Early Childhood Education, largely due to the impact of organized social activism.

Despite the election of a government more responsive to social issues in 2003, privatization strategies and public-private partnerships continued, solidifying an approach that prioritizes results (Nascimento; Barros, 2018). In parallel, the revision of LDB 9.394/1996 by Law No. 12.796/2013 (Brasil, 2013) had direct implications for Early Childhood Education, making preschool enrollment compulsory from the age of 4. The measure, while marking a step forward in the acknowledgment of the right to education, has also prompted discussions about early childhood education and its effects on the pedagogical distinctiveness of Early Childhood Education.

A common curriculum's defense gained momentum in Brazil following the 2016 presidential impeachment, a pivotal context that impacted both the final BNCC content and the procedures used in its development. This curricular base has been developed through a process that has involved historical efforts to standardize curricula in the country. According to Macedo (2019), international organizations' influence is evident in the BNCC, which prioritizes competencies and skills, mirroring neoliberal educational trends focused on developing human capital, where quantifiable outcomes take precedence over broader views of Early Childhood Education.

Pereira (2020, p. 85) criticizes the conceptual and political shift introduced by the BNCC, which redefines "the free doing of children, with attention to the quality of interactions," and instead transforms it into areas focused on learning rather than experience. The shift in focus puts more emphasis on skills and competencies, replacing a child-centred approach with one focused on knowledge mobilization, and promoting a narrow, quantifiable view at the expense of the child's overall development.

Despite recognising the child as a rights holder, the BNCC's limitations stem from its context and the absence of meaningful professional involvement, making it a political tool for governing educational practice. The BNCC is regarded by Durli (2020) as a normative reference point that outlines the fundamental knowledge required for all phases of Basic Education, thereby directing state, municipal, and institutional curricula.

Barbosa, Silveira, and Soares (2019) criticise the age segmentation in the second version of the BNCC that categorizes children into three groups: those from birth to 1 year and 6 months, children aged 1 year and 7 months to 3 years and 11 months, and children aged 4 to 5 years and 11 months. The classification relied on by these authors is weakened by a deficiency in a solid foundation of knowledge, based on outdated biological views from 1960s behavioral psychology and leading to substantial contradictions in their concepts.

One of the most contentious aspects of the BNCC is the incorporation of the "Fields of Experience". The BNCC draws inspiration from John Dewey and the Reggio Emilia approach but overlooks the underlying philosophical and pedagogical principles, instead applying them in a superficial manner. In the latest BNCC version, these fields have been transformed into predetermined learning subjects with specified objectives and skills, losing their original and interconnected characteristics, as seen in the "Change from 'Listening, speaking, thinking, and imagination' in versions 1 and 2 of the BNCCEI to 'Orality and writing' in the third version, which represents a decrease in the conceptions of language and teaching/learning in Early Childhood Education". (Oliveira, 2010, p.11)

Kishimoto (2016) argues that a curriculum centred on children's experiences is incompatible with traditional methods based on predetermined content and skill sets. The BNCC narrows children's rights to learning rights, substituting expansive social rights with predetermined goals. According to Oliveira (2010, p. 3), "the primary objective is to ensure that pedagogical work in early childhood education (ECE) is distinct without being influenced by the concept of disciplines, which is predominant in elementary education (EF) and middle education (EM)".

This more restricted approach is also evident in the objectives of the BNCC, which are encoded with letters and numbers to facilitate monitoring and evaluation. This type of structure often turns children into objects for evaluation. In contrast to this technicist perspective, Oliveira (2010, p. 13) argues that evaluations should "reflect the way children signify their experiences, the world, and themselves through their daily interactions with teachers." This

tension between evaluation as quantification and as comprehension of a child's experience underscores the dangers of an exclusively numerical approach in Early Childhood Education".

Approved in 2017 as a mandatory normative document, the BNCC oversees educational activities across the entire country. However, its structure carries the risk of promoting homogenization, thereby disregarding Brazil's cultural, social, and regional diversity. The implementation of the policy is complicated and contentious, necessitating ongoing "translation and interpretation" of policies by individuals in the educational sector (Ball; Mainardes, 2011), which reveals the contradictions between national guidelines and local practices, as well as the inconsistencies of uniform curricular policies in diverse environments.

To gain a deeper understanding of these complex dynamics, it is essential to examine international examples that offer diverse viewpoints on the difficulties of curricular organization in Early Childhood Education, with Portugal being a particularly noteworthy case due to its unique development of curricular policies for this stage, which have been shaped by specific historical and social factors that warrant consideration.

Portugal: Local Translations

Establishment of Early Childhood Education in Portugal occurred in the 1970s, following the Carnation Revolution of April 25, 1974, which brought an end to the Estado Novo dictatorship that lasted from 1933 to 1974 and marked the beginning of Portugal's redemocratization process. The 1976 Portuguese Constitution (Portugal, 1976) was shaped by the principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1959 (UNICEF, 1959), specifically incorporating the recognition of education as a fundamental right (Article 74^o) and implementing the principles of universal access, free provision, and democratization of education after the April 25th democratization.

The first specific laws to emerge from this constitutional landmark were Law No. 5/77 (Portugal, 1977) and Decree-Law No. 542/79 (Portugal, 1979), which introduced the Statute of Kindergartens and legally structured Preschool education. A dual structure of responsibilities was established, comprising two age groups: nursery centers, children aged 0 to 3 years fell under the Ministry of Labor, Solidarity, and Social Security (MTSSS), where the focus was on basic care; and those aged 3 to 6 years, preschool, however, came under the Ministry of Education (ME), with a focus on educational development. The fragmentation undermines the concept of Early Childhood Education as a unified stage, effectively creating a system described by Moss (2009) as "divided." In reality, nursery center and preschools adopt distinct educational philosophies and approaches that are not clearly aligned with one another, complicating children's transition between these two settings and disrupting the continuity and coherence of their development from an early age.

In the 21st century, neoliberal restructuring strengthened the notion that education is a tool for stimulating economic growth and alleviating poverty. Notable international benchmarks, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Washington Consensus (1989), and OCDE reports (1992), underscored its importance in fostering human capital development for global competitiveness. In this context, Early Childhood Education started to reflect the divide between two viewpoints: one prioritizing the child's holistic development, acknowledging their natural rhythms and inherent rights, and another, economically driven, viewing it as a means to prepare children for the workforce, thereby shaping public policies that attempt to reconcile global priorities with local values and circumstances.

Portugal illustrates the conflict between international demands and local requirements in shaping its Early Childhood Education policy. Decree-Law No. 147/97 marked a notable improvement by increasing the public and free provision of Preschool Education, and introducing the necessity of particular higher education training for professionals functioning as educators (Portugal, 1997a).

The National Education Council issued a critical report in 1994 (Formosinho, 1994), which pointed out major structural issues in Preschool Education, including disjointed management between government ministries, inadequate collaboration between institutions, a poorly managed transition to Fundamental Education, and an excessive focus on

welfare at the expense of pedagogical considerations. Public and political debate on the topic was heightened by this diagnosis (Vasconcelos, 2000). The opinion in question helped bring Early Childhood Education into the public and political spotlight, leading to the passage of the Framework Law for Preschool Education (Law No. 5/97), which acknowledged it as the initial stage of Basic Education and a child's right (Portugal, 1997b). In response, the Plan for the Expansion and Development of Preschool Education was implemented in 1996, with the aim of making access universal and improving the quality of the offer.

The aforementioned Framework Law introduced the concept of individualized educational guidance under the Ministry of Education's jurisdiction³. The primary objective was to ensure uniform educational standards across all types of provision, thereby promoting fairness and excellence in childcare. This move addressed a long-standing issue that had been previously highlighted by Bairão (1990) and Evans (1982), who noted the fragmented nature of pedagogical practice in kindergartens, characterized as a mix of approaches lacking clear guidelines.

Notably in the 1990s, the process of regulatory reform started, with Decree-Law No. 147/97, which set up the Preschool Education Expansion Program, established targets for coverage and secured funding to increase access (Portugal, 1997a). The movement reached its peak in 1997 with the release of the Curricular Guidelines for Preschool Education (OCEPE) by the Ministry of Education, which reinforced the pedagogical foundation of Preschool Education and solidified its position in the national education system.

According to Lemos (2017), two editions of the OCEPE were published, representing distinct political and social circumstances in the country. The initial version marked a significant achievement in the acknowledgment and solidification of Early Childhood Education, stemming from a comprehensive process of consultation with experts and academics. The second event took place in 2016, with lower levels of involvement from early childhood educators, indicative of a particular political environment. The revised curriculum was reorganized into three categories: Personal and Social Development, Expression and Communication, and an understanding of the global environment. Objectives are presented through statements starting with infinitive verbs (to know, to value, to cooperate), indicating a desire to steer clear of rigid goals or standardized objectives. Competencies in continuous development are suggested, which direct educational practice in a flexible and child-focused manner.

The OCEPE's flexible objectives may still be subject to overly simplistic interpretations, particularly in environments where performance is heavily emphasized and academic achievement is highly valued. Without continuous training and teaching support, the curriculum may be implemented in a mechanical and traditional way, thereby negating its intended purpose.

In the Early Childhood Education curriculum, a focus on skills like reading and writing often leads to anticipating formal literacy skills, which in turn undermines the connection between different areas of knowledge and reinforces a simplified view of childhood development. Oliveira-Formosinho (2009) criticizes this logic for downplaying the playful and participatory aspects of children's experiences, cautioning against technicist interpretations that overlook children's own learning patterns and schedules. In contrast, she advocates a pedagogy that focuses on children's "competent action," playfulness, and sensitive listening, recommending critical vigilance to prevent Early Childhood Education from being confined to mere school preparation only. The importance of this perspective is heightened by the daily obstacles faced by educators: while pedagogical guidelines consider the arts a vital aspect of children's lives, the scarcity of available space, teaching time, and instructor training hinders their impact, frequently limiting practices to repetitive, manual tasks that are disconnected from the intended educational goals and lack creativity.

Advances in Portugal's preschool education, including teacher professionalization, expanded provision, and a systematized curriculum, have been made; however, structural challenges persist, notably institutional fragmentation,

³ The Ministry of Education in Portugal has sole pedagogical oversight, which involves the exclusive responsibility of defining, guiding, and supervising Early Childhood Education. It was established by Law Nº. 5/97 to guarantee consistent standards in public, private, and solidarity-based settings, with the goal of promoting equity, quality, and curriculum cohesion. The model ensures a consistent educational service, with well-defined rules for operation, training, curriculum guidelines, and assessment, as stated by Formosinho (1997). It unifies criteria without imposing particular practices, respecting diversity as long as it aligns with national principles.

restricted access, and a lack of coordination between nurseries and preschools, which hinder the development of an integrated policy for early childhood. The National Education Plan, (Law No. 65/2015) (Portugal, 2015), illustrates this contradiction by making preschool education universal for children from the age of 4, while further solidifying the historical divide between nurseries and preschools, exacerbating inequalities in access, and viewing nurseries as a welfare-oriented service that functions more as a family support policy than as part of the fundamental right to education (Vasconcelos, 2011).

A discrepancy in Portuguese childhood policy comes to light, where the recommended alignment of curriculum guidelines with nursery practices has not been achieved, resulting in a gap between early childhood education levels, which undermines pedagogical consistency from an early age (Durlí, 2020). This scenario highlights the necessity for curricular policies that value the various aspects of children's experiences and respect cultural and social differences, as opposed to the technicist and homogenizing approaches prevalent in modern educational reforms in Portugal and Brazil. Implementing a unified, fair, and comprehensive public policy necessitates addressing past inequalities and enhancing educational methods that acknowledge the distinctiveness of children, recognizing Early Childhood Education as a basic right rather than just a precursor to subsequent stages of schooling.

Final Considerations

The study, based on Stephen Ball's policy cycle, found that the development of curriculum policies for Early Childhood Education is a site where conflicting visions of education, childhood, and society are being contested. Analysis of the three contexts proposed by Ball – the context of influence, the context of policy text production, and the context of practice – showed how global pressures from international organizations are mediated by national contexts, resulting in distinct policy configurations that reflect the unique balance of forces in each country.

In terms of influence, the study demonstrated that transnational organizations like UNESCO, UNICEF, the OCDE, the World Bank, and the FMI use discursive imposition mechanisms in education. These groups promote policies that support an economic view of childhood, which has become more prevalent since the 2000s, and in which concepts that appear neutral, like "quality," "efficiency," and "competencies," serve as tools to standardize instruction. This discursive approach perpetuates historical tensions between protectionist and autonomist viewpoints that have existed since the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) by promoting the subordination of early childhood education to economistic logics that place a higher priority on the development of human capital than the holistic development of the child as a subject of rights.

In policy text production, the Brazilian BNCC and the Portuguese OCEPE illustrate how different political contexts condition the capacity to resist external pressures. The BNCC, developed in a context of institutional instability post-2016 and influenced by business organizations, exemplifies the risks of subordinating Early Childhood Education to specific political-economic interests. This is evident in the instrumental appropriation of the fields of experience – which were stripped of their original philosophical foundations inspired by Dewey and the Reggio Emilia approach – and in the semantic and political substitution of "experience" with "learning", as denounced by Pereira (2020). This shift reduces children's rights to rigid learning objectives, curbing teacher autonomy and narrowing educational horizons. The obsession with measurable outcomes flips the focus from the child to a performance-driven metric. As a result, children's culture and diverse developmental pathways are sidelined. In contrast, the OCEPE embraces a flexible philosophy, honoring children's interests and rhythms. Their curriculum flows through three content areas, framing learning as an evolving competency, not a set of inflexible goals.

In the landscape of education, our analysis reveals a profound insight. Implementing curriculum policies transcends the mere application of guidelines; it aimed involves intricate processes of reinterpretation and resistance. Teachers, managers, and school communities navigate these complexities together. This context creates a vital platform

for fostering resistance strategies that honor cultural diversity. Within it, democratic engagement flourishes, and children stand as esteemed subjects of their own rights.

The fragmentation of Early Childhood Education in Brazil, characterized by the division between nursery and preschool—established by LDB/1996 and further defined by the BNCC—and in Portugal, where nurseries are traditionally linked to the social sector with less emphasis on pedagogy, highlights the ongoing tensions between upholding children's comprehensive rights and prioritizing Early Childhood Education based on economic demands. This fragmentation stems from distinct historical developments in each country. In Brazil, the separation between nursery and preschool originates from the assistance-focused roots of nurseries, which were designed to support low-income families, while preschool has evolved as a preparatory phase. Conversely, in Portugal, the association of nurseries with the social sector perpetuates this legacy, resulting in a diminished pedagogical status for these institutions. In both contexts, this fragmentation leads to inconsistencies in children's experiences, undermining a cohesive approach and obstructing a unified pedagogy for early childhood.

From a theoretical standpoint, the research has enhanced our understanding of transnational influence in education by illustrating how international organizations utilize economic conditions and present seemingly neutral technical discourses that reflect particular ideological perspectives. Employing Stephen Ball's Policy Cycle (2022) was crucial for analyzing recontextualization processes, highlighting the interplay between global pressures and local adaptations that influence policy implementation. This theoretical framework allows for a more nuanced examination of contemporary educational reforms, moving beyond linear analyses to reveal the intricate translation and implementation processes involving multiple stakeholders and differing interests.

The findings highlight the necessity of reinforcing viewpoints that uphold the cultural and pedagogical uniqueness of Early Childhood Education in the face of the uniform pressures of global capitalism. There is an urgent need to develop strategies that resist these pressures, emphasizing cultural diversity, democratic involvement in policy development, and recognizing children as rights holders. This approach is essential to counteract reductionist influences that can undermine the quality of educational experiences. Accordingly, this research underscores the value of future studies, particularly ethnographic and longitudinal research, to examine how curriculum policies are implemented in educational settings. It is advisable to enhance international comparisons, deepen the understanding of cultural and regional nuances, and encourage participatory research that includes professionals, families, and communities.

The implications for public policies highlight the need to democratize curriculum development, enhance teacher training, and integrate nursery and preschool services, addressing institutional fragmentation and technocratic approaches. For both countries, it is essential to uphold pedagogical autonomy, appreciate local diversities, and promote more equitable international cooperation. Additionally, ensuring proper funding and creating evaluation systems that focus on the quality of children's experiences is crucial to resisting neoliberal standardization.

This research emphasizes that the development of curriculum policies for Early Childhood Education is closely tied to political, economic, and social contexts. It is essential to consider international influences while also acknowledging local interpretations, ideological differences, and power dynamics that impact their implementation. Consequently, establishing strategies that promote cultural diversity, encourage democratic participation in policy development, and uphold children's rights is vital to countering pressures that may compromise the quality of educational experiences. By fostering this understanding, we can enhance the democratic and liberating aspects of Early Childhood Education, ensuring that curriculum policies support the holistic development of children and contribute to a more equitable society.

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