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Being between walls: plural childhoods and the curricula produced in school institutions[1]

Estar entre muros: Infâncias plurais e os currículos que se produzem nas instituições de acolhimento

Estar entre muros: infancias pluralizadas y los currículos producidos en las instituciones escolares

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Abstract

The study aims to reflect on the constraints imposed on children in the context of institutional foster care, where walls delineate the spaces permitted or forbidden to them. This bibliographic and qualitative research is grounded in the theoretical postulates of Foucault (2014), which assist in understanding the constitution of childhood through a critical lens, thereby opening possibilities for interpreting the functioning of institutions directed toward children. Furthermore, it draws on scholars from the Sociology of Childhood, such as Corsaro (2011), Prout (2004), Sarmento (2007), and Tomás et al. (2021), among others, who recognize children as socially competent subjects and producers of culture. The findings indicate the need for reorientations in the dynamics of foster care institutions, based on the conception of the child as a social actor capable of speaking about themselves and about the realities surrounding them.

Keywords: Foster care. Confinement. Child socialization. Childhood. Curriculum.

Resumo

O estudo tem como objetivo refletir acerca do cerceamento infantil na condição de abrigamento, cujos muros delineiam os espaços permitidos ou proibidos a essas crianças. A pesquisa, de cunho bibliográfico e natureza qualitativa, está respaldada nos postulados de Foucault (2014), que nos auxiliam a compreender a constituição do ser criança a partir de um olhar questionador, abrindo possibilidades para o entendimento do funcionamento das instituições dirigidas a elas. Além disso, fundamenta-se nos estudiosos da Sociologia da Infância, como Corsaro (2011), Prout (2004), Sarmento (2007), Tomás et al. (2021), dentre outros, que reconhecem as crianças como sujeitos socialmente competentes e produtores de cultura. Os resultados apontam a necessidade de redirecionamentos na dinâmica da instituição de acolhimento, com base no conceito de criança como ator social competente para falar sobre si e sobre os fatos ao seu redor.

Palavras-chave: *Acolhimento*. *Enclausuramento. Socialização infantil. Infância. Currículo.*

Resumen

El estudio busca reflexionar sobre la restricción de los niños en los albergues, cuyas paredes delimitan los espacios permitidos o prohibidos para estos niños. La investigación, de carácter bibliográfico y de corte cualitativo, se sustenta en los postulados de Foucault (2014), que ayudan a comprender la constitución del ser niño desde una perspectiva cuestionadora, abriendo posibilidades para comprender el funcionamiento de las instituciones dirigidas a ellos. Además, se basa en estudiosos de la Sociología de la Infancia, como Corsaro (2011), Prout (2004), Sarmento (2007), Tomás et al. (2021), entre otros, quienes reconocen a los niños y niñas como sujetos socialmente competentes y productores de cultura. Los resultados apuntan a la necesidad de redireccionamientos en la dinámica de la institución de acogida, a partir de la concepción del niño como actor social competente para hablar de sí mismo y de los hechos que lo rodean.

Palabras clave: Recepción. Recinto. Socialización infantil. Infancia. Currículum.

1. Introduction

Studies on child sheltering in care institutions highlight multiple issues related to children's lives, encompassing aspects such as daily routines within the shelters, child socialization, subjectivation processes, and reintegration after leaving the institutional environment (Nakasone, 2021; Rodrigues & Prebianchi, 2021; Nogueira, Deslandes & Constantino, 2024). Among these themes, it is important to emphasize the relevance of more closely examining children in peremptory situations, that is, those who grow up in the shelter system, since the prolonged permanence in institutional care reduces their chances of being adopted. Shelter, which should be temporary, thus becomes permanent, and the institution comes to represent the only possible world.

With Modernity, the institutionalization of children became a phenomenon that has increasingly gained ground, affecting, in general, diverse childhoods. The process of placing children in state-run institutions, supported by the Statute of the Child and Adolescent – ECA (Brazil, 1990), although framed as a public policy of child and adolescent welfare, also carries a controversial character. This ambiguity lies in the fact that, in the name of protecting the child, they are removed from an environment deemed unfavorable, while, at the same time, other fundamental rights become circumscribed, such as family and community life, access to cultural experiences, and the full exercise of childhood culture, ultimately resulting in a restrictive routine (Dominico, 2021; Nogueira; Deslandes; Constantino, 2024).

Thus, although shelters seek to meet the basic needs of children and adolescents, such as protection, nutrition, hygiene, and education, the institution fails to guarantee other fundamental rights legally granted to human beings, particularly those related to the psycho-affective dimension. There is a structural limitation that involves situations such as collective spaces with rigid routines, lack of stimulation, few opportunities for children's self-expression, high staff turnover, fragile emotional bonds, tenuous interpersonal relationships, and the absence of a reference figure, among others (Sudario & Moreno, 2022).

In this context, we understand that these institutions also operate as curricular spaces, in the broader sense of the term — not merely as places of instruction, but as territories of experiences, norms, and processes of subjectivation that define what can be lived, felt, and expressed. Curriculum, in this perspective, is conceived as the set of practices, knowledge, and power relations that permeate children's everyday lives, shaping ways of being and living (Silva, 1999; Lopes & Macedo, 2010; Silva & Camba, 2022).

In light of the above, this study, bibliographic in character and qualitative in nature, is grounded in Foucault's theoretical framework (2014), particularly in his critical perspective on society and disciplinary power. According to the author, although power is not exclusive to institutional systems and manifests itself in diverse forms and across different spheres, it is within closed institutions—that is, in these specific spaces—that it becomes most visible and tangible, materializing primarily through discipline as a practice for the production of behaviors.

Furthermore, this study is also grounded in the perspectives of the Sociology of Childhood, a field in continuous development that, from a sociological standpoint, advances the understanding of the child as a socially competent subject and a producer of culture. The guiding axes of the Sociology of Childhood can be synthesized into two main points: the conceptualization of childhood/child, and the theoretical-methodological framework for research in which children themselves play a central role (Martins Filho & Prado, 2020; Silva & Haddad, 2023).

The Sociology of Childhood proposes a new conception of the child, understanding them as a structural element of society and recognizing them as social actors. Within this framework, it takes into account the multiple interactions children establish with their peers and with adults (Evangelista & Marchi, 2022). Moreover, it argues that children's inclusion in society must consider the relationships they establish with cultural artifacts, such as toys, books, technologies, and others (Tocantins & Wiggers, 2021; Santos, 2022).

The intersection between Foucauldian perspectives and the theoretical orientation of the Sociology of Childhood proves to be particularly fruitful for focusing on children in foster care, as it allows us to reflect on and question the experience of a childhood confined within walls, where the shelter becomes the only possible world

(Rizzini & Rizzini, 2004). In this sense, the central problem of this study is: how are the conditions established that result in a restricted experience of childhood for children placed in long-term institutional care? From this concern arises the main objective of this text, which is to reflect on the curtailment of childhood under conditions of sheltering, in which the walls delineate the spaces permitted or prohibited to these children.

Understanding the reality lived by these children contributes to expanding the field of studies on childhood, its ways of life, its perceptions, as well as its feelings, anxieties, fears, and insecurities. Such a perspective enables us to comprehend them as human beings and social subjects, bearers of rights in their condition as children.

The text is structured into three sections, in addition to the introduction. In the first section, we discuss certain aspects of care institutions that impact children's lives. In the second, we examine the concept of prolonged institutionalization and its effects on sheltered subjects. Finally, in the third, we offer insights based on the Sociology of Childhood, outlining potential strategies that could encourage modifications to the way that work with sheltered children is carried out.

1.1 (Mis)routes of childhood: reflections on foster care institutions

The premises of the Sociology of Childhood indicate the existence of multiple childhoods, each with its own specific characteristics. When reflecting on Brazilian childhood, this diversity becomes evident through the different cultures present in the country, which, due to its continental size and the ethnic miscegenation of its population, generate a multiplicity of childhood experiences and ways of living. In this regard, Martins Filho (2020, p. 262) argues that the diverse cultural expressions of children "[...] demand from us adults a careful attention to the meanings they attribute to what they do, especially during moments of play, since children give themselves fully when playing and thereby begin to discover new possibilities of social action."

This diversity of childhood, although already addressed in several studies and research, still requires further investigation and theoretical deepening, particularly concerning children who are often placed at the margins, such as institutionalized children.

Numerous authors, including Corsaro (2011), Sarmento (2007), Kohan and Fernandes (2020), Kremer and Barbosa (2021), among others, emphasize that cultural, historical, and social factors influence the constitution of childhood as a generational category, which is also marked by relations of power, as pointed out by Foucault (1995). These variables that shape childhood also encompass the question of the spaces in which children are situated.

In contemporary times, the process of institutionalization of children, not only in schools but also in other entities such as foster care homes, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and social projects, has grown substantially, delineating a new way of being a child. Accordingly, studies recognize that foster institutions function as a protective measure for children in situations of risk that compromise their fundamental rights, threaten their physical, psychological, or sexual integrity, or when, for various reasons, family life becomes unsuitable. They note that this space holds significant importance in the life of the sheltered child, particularly due to aspects such as the paradox between protection and autonomy. Although it constitutes a public policy of assistance to children, it also carries an ambivalent character (Rizzini & Rizzini, 2004; Silva, 2020; Nogueira, Deslandes & Constantino, 2024). This ambiguity is consolidated insofar as the institutional dynamics of child protection deprive the child of family and social life, thereby infringing upon another fundamental right of childhood.

Studies addressing the institutionalization of children in foster care point to the impacts of this process on children's lives. Some address the positive aspects, understanding these institutions as part of a support and protection network. On the other hand, a portion of research highlights, from a more critical perspective, the detrimental effects of institutionalization on children's lives. Although foster care is an important place that welcomes children in vulnerable situations and carries out various educational and interactive activities, it also deprives them, especially of many forms of socialization (Parra; Oliveira; Maturana, 2019; Silva *et al.*, 2021).

Critically examining this institution, Foucault (1995, p. 245) emphasizes:

> This is not to deny the importance of institutions in organizing power relations. Rather, it is to suggest that it is necessary to analyze institutions from the perspective of power relations, rather than vice versa; and that the fundamental basis of these, even if they are incorporated and crystallized into an institution, must be sought elsewhere.

In the author's excerpt, we can understand that, beyond making a value judgment, it is necessary, first and foremost, to question, problematize, and interrogate the organizational structure, routine, practices, and spaces of the institution and their reverberations in the constitution of the child. This entails critically reflecting on the ways in which power is exercised within care institutions and how this permeates children's experiences, delimiting not only their bodies but also their possibilities for expression, autonomy, and subjective construction. In this context, the Foucauldian lens invites us to shift the focus from the idealization of institutional protection to a denser and more critical analysis of the effects of these structures on the shaping of childhood experienced within institutional confinement.

Foucault's postulates (2014) reveal the construction, beginning in Modernity, of a set of norms and procedures that regulate and constrain children's daily lives in society, allowing us to perceive that, in order to educate children, institutions were conceived and defined, along with their teaching techniques and pedagogical models, in accordance with the modes of social production prevailing in each era. Such institutions — schools, shelters, orphanages — became spaces where knowledge and power intertwine, operating strategies of surveillance, normalization, and discipline. As a result, childhood came to be shaped according to parameters of docility and productivity, revealing a logic of control that goes beyond the simple transmission of knowledge or provision of care, extending into the realms of subjectivation and the regulation of behaviors.

In this sense, the care home can be understood as a space in which mechanisms of power operate to standardize conduct and produce subjects through instituted rules, rigid routines, and constant observation. Such practices not only guarantee institutional order but also shape ways of being and existing, restricting the agency of sheltered children. Constant surveillance, inflexible schedules, standardized activities, and the hierarchy between adults and children recall what Foucault (2014) termed the 'microphysics of power,' in which control is not exercised solely in explicit or violent ways, but rather insinuates itself into everyday practices, becoming naturalized. This operational logic, although justified through the discourse of protection, can significantly limit child development insofar as it constrains freedom, expression, and autonomy.

Historically, medical and biological discourses were instrumental in the normalization of childhoods by prescribing appropriate behaviors and lifestyles for children. However, in modern society, there is a significant prevalence of welfare-oriented and paternalistic arguments. These discourses, articulated with the institutional practices of care entities, form a normative system that, far from guaranteeing children's autonomy, tends to entrap them in a system of perpetual guardianship (Tomás *et al.*, 2021). Thus, even under the guise of protection and care, a regime of control is established that shapes subjectivities, restricts experiences, and silences children's voices in the name of a presumed well-being.

Foucault (2005) emphasizes that this regulatory system not only institutes but also constantly updates ideas, knowledge, and discourses about childhood, which are socially legitimized and widely reproduced. These power structures directly impact children and, when combined with the strong homogenizing tendency promoted by the globalization process, establish ordering mechanisms that, under the guise of physical protection, end up subjugating them. It is, therefore, a regime that disguises control under the guise of care, limiting the diversity of children's experiences and the recognition of childhood as plurality.

In light of these considerations, Parra, Oliveira, and Maturana (2019, p. 167) also identify that foster care entities have

> [...] characteristics of total institutions (prisons, convents, mental institutions, boarding schools, educational institutions, orphanages). In this way, the institution acts by offering special protection to children exposed to

abandonment, violence, and poverty, but it can also end up exposing countless children to other situations and risk factors and effects, such as impaired homework and academic performance, increased aggressive attitudes and reactions, malaise, hostility, and reduced bonds and affection between individuals.

In these terms, childhood is confined, controlled, and governed, revealing that the history of shelters is closely tied to a negativist notion of the child. However, drawing on the repertoire of the Sociology of Childhood, we argue, in line with Parra, Oliveira, and Maturana (2019, p. 171), that "[...] it is necessary to change the discourse of lesser value, of depotentialization, and of lack that is associated with the institutionalized child."

In this sense, discussing institutionalized childhood is a challenge, particularly because it concerns children who are often rendered socially invisible, due to the private and restrictive character of the sheltering process. In the name of protection, these children are, most of the time, deprived of the right to circulate freely and to fully experience public spaces such as parks, cinemas, shopping centers, beaches, and other places of leisure and socialization. This exclusion, often justified by security and care measures, results in practice in both symbolic and physical confinement, which limits children's experiences and compromises the construction of broad and diverse social bonds (Dominico & Yaegashi, 2021).

Nevertheless, broadening our gaze toward these subjects is fundamental, even in the face of the challenges that may arise when entering the universe of sheltered children. Understanding childhood life within foster care units constitutes an essential theoretical and practical movement so that these childhoods may not only be known but also recognized. Such recognition should foster the construction of knowledge that allows us to focus on the child in their entirety — in their ways of being, thinking, acting, dreaming, in their desires, fears, insecurities, anxieties, and everyday experiences. Moreover, comprehending these experiences makes possible the formulation of socio-educational, educational, and social practices that are more sensitive, relevant, and coherent with the needs and specificities of this population (Nogueira, Deslandes & Constantino, 2024).

Within the foster institution, children live under different circumstances: some return to their family of origin, others are in the process of adoption, and, finally, there are those who, not being adopted, remain in the unit for an indefinite period. It is on this latter group that we focus our attention, since their prolonged permanence transforms the institutional space into a continuous living environment, significantly impacting their experiences, relationships, and development.

1.2 Pushed by the clock hands: the prolonged stay of the shelter

The placement of children in foster care institutions, as established by the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (Brazil, 1990), must occur as a temporary measure, with the primary objective of promoting their reintegration into the family of origin or, when this is not possible, their placement in a substitute family. Although the priority is the return to family life, in cases where such reintegration is unfeasible, the legislation guarantees the child the right to institutional care and to remain under this form of protection until placement with a new family becomes possible.

According to the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (Brazil, 1990) and Federal Law No. 12.010 (Brazil, 2009), which regulates adoption in Brazil, the length of stay for children in foster care institutions should not exceed two years. However, despite the advances brought by this legislation, Oliveira and Barros (2016) highlight that many children end up spending their entire childhood in shelters, leaving these institutions only upon reaching the age of majority. In this regard, as the authors emphasize, "[...] the situation of prolonged institutionalization of children and adolescents ultimately violates their right to family and community life, in addition to compromising their emotional well-being and social development" (Oliveira & Barros, 2016, p. 14).

Corroborating this point, the study by Rizzini and Rizzini (2004) indicates that the length of stay in shelters has frequently exceeded the stipulated period, resulting in prolonged institutionalization for many children. Furthermore, other studies identify factors contributing to this extended permanence, such as the slowness in releasing the family

of origin to authorize the termination of parental rights when the family is incapable or unable to raise the child; the preference for adopting younger children, especially infants; the search for children who physically resemble adoptive parents; and the preference for children who do not present characteristics considered "abnormal" by society (Silva, 2020; Souza & Brito, 2021).

Consequently, a significant number of children grow up in shelters, and their likelihood of adoption steadily decreases as their time in the foster care system increases. What should have been a temporary measure ultimately becomes permanent, and in this context, the institution comes to represent the only world these children know.

When directing our attention to children who remain in shelters for long periods, we can infer, based on the study by Dominico (2021), that they become more vulnerable to having their identities marked by stigma. These children tend to internalize experiences of rejection and exclusion, factors that contribute to lives permeated by segregation. On the other hand, life within the institutional environment also provides opportunities for the construction of meanings, which directly influence these children's processes of subjectivation. Often, within the rigid routines of the institution, as demonstrated in the aforementioned study, it is not always perceived that, for these children and adolescents, the shelter becomes their home. A home which, although theirs, also belongs to everyone, due to the collective nature of the institution.

This ambiguity between the individual and the collective permeates the constitution of being a child in this space, where the child-subject encounters dilemmas that, for the most part, they learn to face on their own. One such dilemma is related to the institution's routine. Given the nature and purpose of the institution, its organization differs from that of a conventional household. At the heart of this issue are determinations and impositions directed at the sheltered children, which typically constrain, curtail, and limit their critical sense, their lived experiences, their exploration of space, and even the recognition of their constitution as social subjects. Even while being sheltered, they still remain part of a broader human dimension (Dominico & Yaegashi, 2021).

The truth of this reflection is also represented in a poetic way by Reyes (1989, p.30):

> I have had but one home. I recall its moonlit corridors, its arches and columns, its plane trees and oranges, its birds and flowing waters with ecstasy. From this vision springs my life. It is the root of my consciousness, the first taste of my senses, the first joy, and now, in its absence, perennial pain. […] The houses I later inhabited were alien to me. Separated from my first center, I felt strange everywhere. I mourn the absence of my childhood home with a feeling of pilgrimage, with a weariness of an endless journey.

The poet invites us to reflect on the movement of dispossession to which the child is subjected, being forced to inhabit a new house that, at first, is 'alien' to them. Over time, however, and in a state of (in)conformity, the child adapts to the modes of living imposed upon them, gradually constituting themselves as a child within this new space.

Just as routine, space also plays a crucial role in education and exerts a significant influence on the shaping of these childhoods. As time passes, signaled by the hands of the clock, the shelter gradually transforms into a home for the child. In this way, the institution ceases to be merely a set of walls and takes on the dimension of a home, where bonds are forged among the subjects who inhabit it (Dominico, 2021).

Children who already bear a history of fragile family ties end up living in a space with limited opportunities for socialization. In other words, they experience a kind of legalized confinement, resulting from situations of which they are victims, not responsible agents. In this regard, Nascimento and Andrade (2020) argue that the social visibility of these children continues to be shaped by negative notions, such as abandonment, delinquency, violence, and deprivation, among others.

Foucault's ideas (2014) have been fundamental for reflecting on childhood experiences in foster institutions. From his studies, we understand that space plays a decisive role in the formation of human subjectivity. Depending on how space is organized, it can either foster autonomy or restrict subjects. Within the environment of the foster home, a control and administration of bodies can be observed, resulting in a contradictory and subjectively painful process that gradually becomes naturalized. With no alternatives, children end up merely (sub)existing in these spaces,

adapting themselves, attempting to sleep in shared rooms, accepting the food offered to them, and moving in restricted ways within the house, always behind closed gates, with their gaze turned toward the limitations of their world (Dominico; Yaegashi, 2021).

In light of the foregoing, the concept of governmentality, as explained by Foucault (2014), provides us with an understanding that foster institutions are immersed within society and do not operate in isolation from the structures of ordering and disciplining that characterize relations across different social spheres. Thus, foster homes not only provide shelter for children but also promote specific ways of seeing, thinking, and acting in the world, directly influencing the subjective formation of these children.

Resende (2015, p. 202), in his reflections on institutionalization, reveals that institutions "[...] produce and reproduce relations of force (domination, struggles, and resistances) that engendered them in a given period and that are instrumentalized within the establishments and power dispositifs that sustain them." In this sense, similar to prisons, asylums, hospitals, and schools, foster care spaces also incorporate governmental practices, shaping the behavior and subjectivity of the individuals who reside there, based on structures of control and discipline that often aim to maintain order within these institutions.

Likewise, reflecting on this concept of governmentality, Veiga-Neto (2015, p. 55) states that "[...] we may say that to govern childhood means to educate children, molding their soul, which is, at the same time, both the effect and the instrument of an anatomo-politics of and upon children's bodies."

Within this normative system of control, children are subjected to modulations in order to become "habitable" within these spaces. They are conditioned to follow rules imposed upon all who inhabit the environment, which results in a homogenization of behaviors, given that they must comply with determinations such as fixed times for waking, eating, personal hygiene, and other activities. The institutional logic, in our view, generates a dynamic fraught with contradictions that mark the experience of childhood in this context. Under the discourse of care and protection, the right to guardianship, associated with the child's security, ends up being translated into the confinement of subjects, as Goffman (2020) points out in his studies on total institutions.

It is precisely at the heart of this normativity that freedom finds itself separated by walls, keys, and gates, with discourses that validate the replacement of certain rights with others. In the name of child safety, fundamental subjective rights, such as community life, freedom of choice, individuality, social interaction, and the expansion of cultural experiences, are restricted or even usurped, as Dominico (2021) points out.

The realization that this condition is not merely temporary is disquieting, for, as time steadily advances, we witness institutionalized childhood progressing continuously, with no respite. There is no alternative but conformity, which becomes a relief for a restricted, incarcerated, and disciplined childhood experience. Given this scenario of acceptance, it seems essential to ask: how is it possible to redefine childhood and its experiences in these spaces?

1.3 Fostering childhood: possibilities from the perspective of the Sociology of Childhood

In light of what has been presented in the previous sections, we infer that childhood has always been the target of adult control. This stance derives, to a large extent, from the perception of the child as a being marked by absences, that is, viewed through incapacity, incompleteness, and fragility in relation to the adult. This dynamic, as highlighted by Dominico (2021), becomes even more evident in the lives of institutionalized children, for in addition to these conditions, their social interactions are limited to the shelter environment. Such a situation has often generated negative impacts, resulting in suffering of various kinds — psychological, emotional, and affective — thereby compromising these children's ability to establish relationships with others.

Moreover, this reality has been consolidated by multiple variables that directly affect the organizational structure of care institutions. However, research has pointed to possible pathways for re-signifying the shelter experience, moving away from the rigid model of norms and disciplinary practices that have historically shaped

institutional care (Dominico; Yaegashi, 2021; Cassol; Rocha; Maciel, 2021). From this perspective, we envision the emergence of new understandings and practices grounded in the theoretical assumptions of the Sociology of Childhood, which recognize the child as an active subject and producer of culture.

This approach places children and childhood experiences at the center of the relationships established within social institutions, proposing new ways of thinking about and engaging with them — ways that break with practices that conceive of children as passive subjects. The Sociology of Childhood has consolidated itself as a field of study investigating with and about children, recognizing them as social agents. This perspective advances a view detached from the constraints of modern thought, which reduced childhood to exclusively biological and psychological aspects, thereby justifying the constant need for adult control. The theoretical contribution of this discipline thus proves fundamental in confronting the child's view as a being in formation that must be molded to fit society (Sarmento, 2007; Corsaro, 2011).

This field advances an expanded conception of the child, understanding them as a historical and cultural subject, embedded within social networks that directly influence their constitution. From this perspective, children come to be recognized as producers of cultures — cultures that, although distinct from those created by adults, are equally legitimate and unique to the universe of childhood. These cultural productions are constructed in the everyday lives of children: in school interactions, in play, in their repertoires of expression, and in their modes of being in the world. By offering theoretical instruments, the Sociology of Childhood advances our understanding of this universe, encouraging a widened perspective and, crucially, the development of relationships that make room for children to produce culture and to be genuinely heard (Valle; Schwantz, 2024).

It is from this perspective that we propose a more attentive reflection on the contributions of the Sociology of Childhood. This approach makes it possible to question what, in fact, is the role of the adult in the relationships established with children in the context of care institutions. Based on this theoretical framework, we underscore the need for new postures that seek to understand children's thinking, consider their points of view, and value their cultural expressions. In this way, it becomes possible to project alternative forms of interaction between adults and children within these institutions, grounded in mutual respect and sensitive listening (Tomás *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, the Sociology of Childhood calls us to take a closer look at the condition of the sheltered child, especially with regard to the place they occupy within the care institution. Does the child live in the house, or merely inhabit it? Are they invited to participate actively in everyday decisions and routines, or do they simply follow an itinerary pre-established and guided by adults? These questions compel us to reflect, first, on the need to break with the universalist view of childhood — one that perceives the child as a homogeneous and passive being — and second, on the concept of child participation, understood as the child's right to be heard, to express their opinions, and to engage actively with their life context.

Reflecting on the first point, childhood studies demonstrate that the concepts of child and childhood are neither fixed nor universal but vary according to historical and sociocultural contexts. Sarmento (2007) emphasizes that the definitions and representations constructed about the child directly influence the ways in which we relate to them. Within the discourses and bodies of knowledge forged in modernity, one observes the consolidation of a homogeneous conception of childhood, which sustains what the author terms the symbolic administration of childhood. This generalizing perspective tends to standardize behaviors, disregarding the singularities of real childhoods. In this regard, drawing from the framework of the Sociology of Childhood, we argue that it is necessary to take the opposite path: to deconstruct this unitary view. Such a movement is essential to break with the logic of massification that often prevails in residential care institutions, conditioning boys and girls to molds that fail to recognize their individualities.

The insights provided by the Sociology of Childhood compel us to understand and acknowledge that, although children share a collective environment of coexistence, they are not homogeneous. Each child has their own ways of thinking, feeling, and responding to events, as well as distinct tastes and preferences. In other words, they possess

their own peculiarities. From this perspective, this theoretical approach equips us, first and foremost, to recognize the child as a social and cultural subject, with their own forms of being, existing, and acting in the world. Based on this recognition, it becomes both possible and necessary to rethink and transform the ways in which adults relate to children in the daily life of institutions. Such a change implies a shift away from a logic of control and homogenization, opening space for more dialogical, respectful, and sensitive relations toward the specificities of each childhood.

Recognizing the child as a subject who, through interaction, produces meaning and constructs their own history is a fundamental step toward enabling effective changes in how children are perceived and engaged with. In this regard, the practice of listening carefully and recognizing the unique dimensions of childhood — its specificities, needs, desires, aspirations, and viewpoints — enables adults to engage more closely with the world of children. To this end, it becomes indispensable to adopt new attitudes, among them the recognition and appreciation of children's communicative diversity, that is, of their multiple forms of expression and language (Tomás *et al.*, 2021).

As Malaguzzi (1999) argues, children are endowed with infinite languages — they communicate through words, gestures, crying, facial and bodily expressions, as well as through graphic forms, and, at times, even through silence as a mode of expression. This communicative diversity must be regarded as central to the work of professionals who interact with children in care, for it is through such diversity that genuine relationships and the strengthening of affective bonds become possible. By recognizing and valuing these multiple forms of communication, professionals contribute to the child's development of a sense of belonging within the institutional space, which, precisely through these relationships and exchanges of experiences, can be re-signified and transformed into their environment — a space that, in fact, becomes the child's own.

In light of the foregoing, constructing educational practices and routines that value children's capabilities ensures that their stay in the institution is not predominantly marked by feelings of exclusion, rejection, abandonment, loneliness, or deprivation — emotions that frequently permeate the experience of institutional care. Such reorientations guide actions grounded in respect for childhood and foster contexts in which the child may, indeed, live their condition of being a child within the shelter: experiencing the time of childhood, playing with peers, establishing bonds of trust with surrounding adults, expressing their feelings, and being recognized and respected as a social subject of the present — of the here and now.

This reflection on child participation is fundamental, for it compels us to question and transform how children are perceived and treated within care institutions and other social spheres. As noted by Tomás *et al.* (2021) and Fernandes and Marchi (2020), until the 1990s the concept of participation was centered on an adult-centered perspective, in which children were viewed as beings incapable of expressing opinions or making meaningful decisions about their own lives. Within this vertical and paternalistic approach, child participation was often reduced to listening to children's opinions in a merely tokenistic way, without such opinions having real implications for decision-making. It was a form of participation in which adults held the reins and, in many cases, regarded children as objects of care, rather than as active subjects in the construction of their own life stories.

With the movement toward valuing the Sociology of Childhood, the notion of participation has been rethought and came to be understood more horizontally, as children began to be seen as protagonists of their own lives and of their process of knowledge construction. By considering this active participation, it becomes possible to create environments where children are not only cared for, but also recognized in their capacity to express themselves and to have a voice in matters that affect their daily lives, such as within care institutions. Such participation cultivates feelings of belonging and autonomy, both of which are essential for healthy development and the construction of a stronger and more secure identity (Tomás *et al.*, 2021).

On this point, Tomás *et al.* (2021, p.45) offer the following definition of participation: "To participate means to directly influence decisions and the process in which negotiation between adults and children is fundamental, a process that can integrate both divergences and convergences regarding the intended objectives and that results in a hybrid process."

This assertion invites us to understand participation as an inclusive process grounded in listening to and recognizing children as subjects endowed with rights and with capacities that differ from those of adults. In this sense, it calls for a reformulation of the concept of childhood, as we have discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

Tomás *et al.* (2021) argue that the promotion of participation rights, in their various dimensions, constitutes an imperative of childhood citizenship. Accordingly, if participation is a fundamental right of citizenship, then failing to promote children's participation means denying them the right to be citizens in their condition as children. This makes clear that the full exercise of children's citizenship depends on the guarantee of their participation. The authors make their position clear, affirming the premises they defend: "[...] Not only the formal recognition of the right, but also the conditions for its exercise through full participation" (Tomás *et al.*, 2021, p.45). The authors further observe that children's healthy development also depends on their insertion into the social world. In this regard, they identify several obstacles that hinder children's participation: the challenge posed to family authority; the tension between protection and participation; the lack of time and resources to foster participation; the reproduction of the adult model of participatory processes; the lack of trust in children's competences; the disregard for children's own language; and family and school dynamics that do not favor participation, among others.

Perceived within the core of the foster home, the notion of child participation, in addition to acknowledging the right of children to participate, also points to a reconfiguration of the dimension of guardianship, which is exercised over institutionalized children in a much more deliberate way than over those living with their families. Under the power of guardianship and the management of adults within the care institution, children are, in the name of protection, controlled, surveilled, and governed, thus having many of their actions inhibited and usurped. Under these conditions, one may question how children's participation is realized within the foster home and what characterizes the nature of this participation.

We concur with Fernandes and Marchi (2020) that participation challenges children's social subordination. In this sense, an institution genuinely concerned with human development and autonomy must assume child participation as a foundational condition in its proposals and daily activities. Following this reasoning, we consider it crucial that all professionals within the institution take a clear stance and remain willing to listen to children and learn from them. Considering and implementing responsive listening is essential in the effort to counter adultocentrism, because the active participation of the child calls for an alternative perspective on the child and on childhood itself.

The acknowledgment of children as capable and engaged social actors, able to interpret experiences and construct their own realities, combined with participatory dynamics, is essential for establishing citizenship-focused relationships. In this regard, social interactions within the foster home must be grounded in the concept of participation — a participation supported by the child's own logic of discovery and symbolization. This offers a pathway through which adults and children may assume new roles, where the former cease to be oppressors and regulators, and the latter cease to be subjugated.

1.4 Curricula in childcare institutions: between the norm and the creation of the possible

Although foster care institutions are not formal educational settings, they nonetheless produce and reproduce curricula. Understood from a broadened perspective, curricula are not limited to the content and objectives formally prescribed by schools but encompass the ways in which subjects are constituted within different social spaces, through practices, relationships, and discourses (Silva, 1999; Lopes; Macedo, 2010).

In this sense, the daily life of foster care institutions operates as a lived and hidden curriculum that regulates behaviors, defines what can or cannot be experienced, and shapes children's subjectivities. The standardized routines, rigid schedules, constant surveillance, absence of space for listening, and the scarcity of diverse cultural experiences constitute a disciplinary and normative curriculum (Foucault, 2014; Goffman, 2020).

These curricula are marked by an adult-centered and welfare-based logic that, even under the guise of protection, exerts forms of control that restrict children's agency and expression. Thus, institutional care, rather than serving as a space for the expansion of possibilities, may function as a mechanism of silencing and homogenization, particularly when children are deprived of participation in decisions that directly affect their lives (Tomás *et al.*, 2021; Fernandes & Marchi, 2020).

However, it is essential to recognize that even within contexts of symbolic or physical confinement, children resist and create possibilities. Their play, forms of communication, affections, and ways of inhabiting the world constitute means of constructing alternative curricula — curricula made with childhoods, in which invention, difference, and plurality find their place. This entails recognizing children as producers of culture and meaning, rather than merely as recipients of care and norms (Corsaro, 2011; Sarmento, 2007).

As Deleuze and Guattari (1997) propose, the creation of possibilities emerges in the interstices of the norm, at the margins of what is intended to be fixed. Curricula within institutions operate similarly: between the instituted and the instituting, between what is prescribed and what is lived, between control and potentiality. To reflect on the curricula produced with and/or for institutionalized childhoods is, therefore, to confront the symbolic disputes that permeate these spaces and to affirm the right of all children to experience, to be heard, to participate, and to invent worlds.

Final considerations

This study aimed to reflect on the restrictions imposed on children living under institutional care, where walls delineate the boundaries of the spaces that are or are not accessible to them.

Reflecting on childhood within institutional care is an act of making visible. The challenge is not to deny the necessity of such care, but to propose new directions that ensure the child's right to fully experience their childhood. Institutions must be rethought not merely as spaces of protection, but as territories of formation and of the creation of bonds. The Sociology of Childhood contributes to this endeavor by offering a new paradigm that recognizes the child as a co-author of their own history and culture.

Reshaping the care provided to institutionalized children is a collective commitment. It is urgent to abandon perspectives that infantilize and subordinate, and instead recognize children as social subjects — bearers of rights and active voices within the spaces they inhabit.

In this regard, it becomes essential to recognize that foster care institutions, although not educational spaces in the formal sense, nonetheless produce and operate curricula, understood here as sets of practices, discourses, and routines that permeate and shape the ways of being and experiencing childhood. These curricula, often implicit and normative, tend to regulate behavior and restrict experiences under the pretext of protection. However, within the gaps of such normalization, other — non-prescribed — curricula also emerge, woven with and by children through their gestures, play, acts of resistance, and everyday creations.

Reflecting on curricula with and/or for institutionalized childhoods is, therefore, an urgent task for the fields of education and childhood studies. It entails questioning how institutions shape (or constrain) livable childhood experiences, while envisioning the creation of possibilities that allow for the emergence of diverse, inventive, and autonomous forms of childhood. Recognizing the child as an active subject also means acknowledging their capacity to intervene, to participate, and to co-construct the curricula of everyday life — even within walls.

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