Handbook of International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education

Jaipaul L. Roopnarine, James E. Johnson, Suzanne Flannery Quinn, Michael M. Patte

Early Childhood Education in Brazil

Publication details
Zilma de Moraes Ramos de Oliveira
Published online on: 01 Mar 2018

How to cite: Zilma de Moraes Ramos de Oliveira. 01 Mar 2018, Early Childhood Education in Brazil from: Handbook of International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education Routledge
Accessed on: 08 Sep 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
A transformation in early childhood education (ECE) has been occurring in Brazil since the Federal Constitution of 1988 incorporated daycare centers into the educational system. This move, which considered young children’s education as a right to be fulfilled from birth onward, has produced considerable debate. Determining how to provide the most beneficial scenario for educating diverse groups of young Brazilian children has not been easy (Evans & Kosec, 2012). Nevertheless, within the context of competing ideologies, geography, and socioeconomic conditions, ECE in Brazil continues to evolve toward a more child-centered approach of service delivery.

Prior to the Federal Constitution of 1988, surveys on daycare routines for children from low-income families pointed to the existence of poor interactional contexts, a lack of play materials and books for children’s explorations and interactions, and a philanthropic mentality that dictated staff decisions (Evans & Kosec, 2012; Silveira, Picolo, Delphino, Faria, & Rossetti-Ferreira, 1987). At that time, a critical examination of curriculum proposals for preschools elaborated by state governments showed their inadequacy with regard to certain key characteristics associated with young children (e.g., children’s ability to construct their own understanding of the world, quality ECE environments, unequal access to ECE) and an attempt to privilege the model traditionally prescribed for primary school students (Araujo, Lopez-Boo, & Puyana, 2013; Brazil, 1996). More recently, the general picture brought by national surveys indicated some improvements, especially regarding material resources and teacher qualifications, although these positive indicators are far from being universal (Campos, Füllgraf, & Wiggers, 2006; Evans & Kosec, 2012).

Some of the positive curriculum developments were influenced by international successes in ECE, particularly in the European countries (Edwards & Gandini, this volume; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993; Gandini & Edwards, 2000; Musatti & Mantovani, 1986; Penn, 2000; Rayna, Laevers, & Deleau, 1996), discussions at conferences and in courses, and by books written by Brazilian experts in the area. Political analysis of the impact of preschool education across Europe (e.g., EPPE in England, Reggio Emilia in Italy) and North America (e.g., HighScope in the US) has also been instrumental in guiding recent developments in ECE in Brazil (Araujo et al., 2013; Burger, 2010; David, 1998; Edwards & Gandini, this volume; Moss & Penn, 1996; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2013; Schweinhart & Weikart, 2013). The legacy of these influences has prompted a call by many popular social movements for high-quality ECE for all children. In terms of a national discourse about the education of young children,
European models remain quite seductive, despite pragmatist claims of a utopian idealism apparently ill-suited to the obvious difficulty of implementing them in the poorer regions of Brazil.

**A Picture of ECE in Brazil**

According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), in 2014, Brazil had 202,768,562 inhabitants with 7,855,991 children under 6 years of age. From 2009, preschool was legally defined as part of compulsory education for 4- and 5-year-olds. In 2004, 89.1% of the 4- and 5-year-old population were included in the educational system, while 29.6% of children from 0 to 3 years old were attending daycare centers (Brazil, 2014). The centers mostly operated under the responsibility of city governments, though many around the country remain private entities.

There has been a sizeable increase in the ECE population. Preschool attendance for 4- and 5-year-olds grew by 22.7% from 2001 to 2014, while the daycare population of children aged 0–3 increased by 15.8% over the same period. Despite these significant gains in enrollment patterns, race, region, and socioeconomic status remain key determinants in the accessibility of ECE programs: urban populations have more opportunities to access ECE than rural ones (Table 3.1), white children enjoy greater access than black children (Table 3.2), the south and southwest of the nation are privileged over the north and northeast (Table 3.3), and children from better economic backgrounds have greater opportunities to access ECE institutions than children from the poorest households (Table 3.4). For instance, children with the most economic resources are three times as likely to enroll in daycare and 24% more likely to enroll in preschool than those with the least economic resources (Evans & Kosec, 2012). In the face of these realities, significant expansion would be required to accommodate the needs of children in both preschool and daycare.

| Table 3.1 Percentage of children attending ECE units according to their residence |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Residence                      | 0 to 3-year-olds    | 4 to 5-year-olds    |
| Rural                          | 8.4                | 72.8                |
| Urban                          | 26.1               | 83.2                |
| PNAD/IBGE (Brazil, 2015)       |                     |                     |

| Table 3.2 Percentage of children attending ECE units according to their race/color |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Race/color                      | 0 to 3-year-olds    | 4 to 5-year-olds    |
| Black                           | 20.4                | 79.4                |
| White                           | 26.2                | 83.9                |
| PNAD/IBGE (Brazil, 2015)        |                     |                     |

| Table 3.3 Percentage of children attending ECE units according to geographic region |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Region                          | 0 to 3-year-olds    | 4 to 5-year-olds    |
| North                           | 9.2                 | 67.9                |
| Northeast                       | 19.2                | 87.0                |
| Center-west                     | 18.3                | 72.1                |
| Southeast                       | 28.3                | 85.0                |
| South                           | 32.0                | 73.9                |
| Brazil                          | 23.2                | 81.4                |
| PNAD/IBGE (Brazil, 2015)        |                     |                     |
The educational characteristics of ECE services offered are also unequal. Research on public ECE programs in five state capitals highlighted differences in the nature of infrastructure, daily routines, and teacher preparation across regions and a general lack of good pedagogical experiences (Campos et al., 2011; see also Evans & Kosec, 2012). Given the pervasive nature of education inequality in Brazil, it is not surprising that the principal challenge to a national ECE policy remains equal access to high-quality services for a diverse population of young children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Attaining universal preschool enrollment for children from 4 to 5 years of age remains a major goal.

### Movement Toward Child-Centered Care and Education

An important challenge to the new status of ECE in the Brazilian educational system lies in the transformation of the way in which the child and his/her learning and development processes are conceived by teachers, a key aspect for pedagogical work. The elaboration of many educational proposals crafted for children from varying ethnic, economic, and social backgrounds has evidenced an oscillation between two models. While the education of children from low-income families is largely guided by a traditional philanthropic rationale and more traditional teacher-directed approaches to pedagogy, children from middle- and upper-class families are educated through routines based on the progressive ideas of Froebel, Montessori, Dewey, Malaguzzi, and other educators and theorists (see Edwards & Gandini; Johnson & Patte, this volume).

Research conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s (Evans & Kosec, 2012; Rossetti-Ferreira et al., 1985) showed the inadequacies in many Brazilian public daycare centers. Precarious environmental conditions for learning and development at these sites were revealed not only by a low adult/child ratio, but also by empty spaces with few toys that fostered child passivity and hindered early peer interactions. The emphasis on secure early parent–child attachment that required sensitively attuned care between adult and child, as proposed by Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth et al. (1978), resulted in more tensions for the educators and long enrollment waiting times for under-stimulated children.

At that time, it was clear that the emphasis on sensitive adult–child interactions for learning and development prompted by developmental psychology in the twentieth century was hindering the discussion on the value of early peer interaction in child development (Oliveira & Rossetti-Ferreira, 1996). Synchronic and diachronic analysis of the linkages between successive children’s interactions in free play and other situations revealed that early peer group participation is a privileged mediator for knowledge construction and psychological development (Oliveira & Valsiner, 1997; Pedrosa, Bussab, & Carvalho, 2007; Carvalho, Império-Hamburger, & Pedrosa, 1997, among others). Other investigations (e.g., Campos-de-Carvalho & Rossetti-Ferreira, 1993) showed a significant increase in the occurrence of peer group interactions as the spatial environment became more structured in small areas.

These and other new perspectives about infants and very young children, especially neo-constructive approaches to learning and development, have opened new possibilities to understand the necessary conditions for them to appropriate languages and knowledge acquisition within a
collective educational environment. The ideas of subjectivity and diversity also were acknowledged for the recognition of the singular way in which each child interacts with the world and views himself/herself as included in, or excluded from, his/her community, school, or social milieu. By remaining aware of this singularity, educators may assess children’s groups for evidence of discriminatory behavior and for finding ways of fostering inclusion.

The holistic nature of modern scientific inquiry about the development and learning of infants and young children, and risk and protective factors that may influence this process—encompassing aspects of psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, and sociology—has been fundamental to the construction of a more democratic public policy for ECE in Brazil (Anda et al., 2006; Engle et al., 2007; Shonkoff, 2010; Shonkoff et al., 2012; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Research funding set aside for this task is now more available to academics and this has encouraged and improved upon basic and applied research on ECE practices and childhood outcomes since the latter half of the previous century.

More importantly, the influence of the works of Piaget, Vygotsky, Wallon, and others has begun to supplant the traditional idea of the child as fragile and emotionally unstable, is being replaced with understandings of the child as an active and curious agent in his/her development (see Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1967). This shift has changed the aims of many early childhood institutions that were traditionally more concerned with the physical needs of children than providing them with stimulating and playful activities to advance their social, cognitive, and physical development. Arguably, this marks the single most important shift in the ECE systems in Brazil.

**ECE Curriculum: Some Difficulties in Its Construction**

The institutional condition of daycare centers and preschools introduced by the Constitution of 1988 promoted the necessity for a clear conceptual and methodological identity to the pedagogical plans of the ECE institutions in terms of curriculum perspectives and the prepared environment for children’s learning. Not unlike other developing nations in Latin America (e.g., Chile, Argentina) and the Caribbean (e.g., Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago), high-quality early childhood services continues to be a primary concern in Brazil (see Araujo et al., 2013).

In 1996, a National Educational Law defined the goal of ECE in Brazil as the integral development of the child up to 5 years of age and his/her physical, psychological, intellectual, and social development, in articulated actions with the family and the community, and strengthened by the importance of structuring and organizing positive educational activities to promote the growth and development of young children. Since then, the process of defining the role, shape, and curricular specificity of ECE in Brazil has been strengthened considerably. In its new iteration, ECE has incorporated input from national discussions and academic research, focused on the training of human resources, produced written and audiovisual materials, and outlined legal determinations. The result is a new perspective that is just beginning to take root and spread among Brazilian ECE teams nationally.

Instituted in 1999 and revised in 2009 by the National Council on Education (CNE), the National Curricular Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI) further articulated ECE policy in Brazil. From these guidelines, curriculum is derived from practices that aim to integrate children’s experiences and knowledge that are part of the cultural, artistic, environmental, scientific, and technological patrimony, to promote the holistic development of children up to age 5 (Brazil, 2009, article 3°).

The main goal of the DCNEI is to outline basic parameters for the construction of pedagogical plans by the ECE institutions, including educational strategies, references to physical space, timetable, and calendar. That framework also recognizes children’s interactions and play as the focus of the educational project. Children’s observations, investigations, questionings, and productions are integrated with the teacher’s propositions and with material conditions for the appropriation of meaningful cultural elements that allow boys and girls to elaborate their personal and dynamic senses of the world.
To guide the ECE units in the construction of their curriculum, three core principles were proposed by the DCNEI: ethical (autonomy, responsibility, solidarity, and respect for the common good), political (rights and duties of citizenship, exercise of critical thinking and respect for a democratic order) and aesthetic (sensitivity, creativity, playfulness, and diversity of artistic and cultural manifestations). The DCNEI also advocates for the organization of evaluation strategies through follow-up assessments and documentation of the care and education practices for young children. This involves an examination of the conception, development, supervision, and evaluation of the pedagogical project of the teachers.

**The National Common Core for the ECE Curriculum**

In 2016, the Brazilian Ministry of Education sent a *National Common Core Curriculum* (BNCC) for Basic Education for analysis and approval by the National Educational Council (CNE) that presented the learning rights and objectives at each schooling level—Early Child Education, Fundamental, and Medium Studies. The goal of the BNCC for ECE is to provide all children up to 5 years of age, regardless of region, race, or socioeconomic status, with meaningful opportunities to explore their curiosity and to access processes of knowledge appropriation, renovation, and articulation, while interacting with others in different cultural practices.

Six learning rights for young children are outlined in BNCC for ECE:

- To live together democratically with children and adults
- To play with other children
- To participate in daily experiences
- To explore aspects of the environment
- To express emotions, desires, ideas, and arguments
- To construct a self-image.

The curriculum structure proposed by the BNCC was further delineated according to the DCNEI’s support for the learning experiences that should be promoted in ECE (Brazil, 2009, article 9°). They are:

- Sensorial, expressive, and corporal experiences
- Gestural, Verbal, Plastic, Dramatic, and Musical languages
- Narratives and other forms of interaction with oral and written language
- Work with measures, quantitative relationships, shapes, and space-time orientations
- Individual and group activity
- Self-care and self-organization moments
- Dialogues with cultural and personal diversity
- Exploration of the physical and social world, time, and nature
- Manifestations of music, graphic and plastic arts, cinema, photography, dance, theater, poetry, and literature
- Preservation and knowledge of biodiversity and environment sustainability
- Actions and events involving aspects of Brazilian folklore
- Use of audio records, photo machines, film projectors, computers, and other technological and media resources.

These experiences recognize the importance of corporal culture, of verbal and artistic languages for the development of an ethical attitude, of critical thought, and of an aesthetic sensibility for children’s comprehension of the world in which they live. They also aid identity construction and...
foster autonomy in self-care and self-organization. Positive experiences are promoted through daily child–child and adult–child relationships mediated by spaces and materials organized for meaningful cultural practices coordinated by the teacher that investigates, instigates, and articulates the children’s knowledge and abilities within the context of social knowledge already constructed.

The BNCC for ECE avoids curriculum organization in formal disciplines related to objects of knowledge and states that the experiences manifested by DCNEI should be structured in five fields of experiences:

- The I, the Other, and the Us
- Body, Gestures, and Movements
- Listening, Speaking, Thinking, and Imagining
- Traces, Sounds, Colors, and Images
- Space, Time, Relationships, and Transformations.

These fields of experiences highlight children’s interactions and play as sites wherein meaning, observation, questioning, and discovering emerge in transdisciplinary ways. Learning objectives in each one of the fields of experiences are defined for three age groups, according to children’s developing characteristics: infants (from 0 to 18 months), toddlers (from 19 months to 3 years and 11 months), and preschoolers (from 4 years to 6 years and 11 months). This structure has been received favorably, though it has invited criticism as well. The concept of learning through significant cultural practices, especially through peer interactions and play, is the main merit of the proposal insofar as it answers to the specificity of ECE in the school system proposing a curriculum concerned with the development and education of young children.

**Teacher Training**

The 1996 National Education Law mandated that all teachers of children from birth to 10 years of age must possess accreditation from institutions of higher education. However, that goal has not been achieved yet. The Brazilian School Census of 2014 indicated the presence of 498,785 ECE teachers, predominantly women. Only 311,057 of them were graduates of universities. This discrepancy touches particularly, but not entirely, upon public and philanthropic services attending to children from low-income families, given that the staff training and working conditions for those who work with poor children are more precarious and the adult–child ratio higher. As in other cultural communities, these factors can undermine the provision of high-quality care and education for the most vulnerable children at a critical period in their development (Shonkoff, 2010).

The BNCC-EI curriculum perspective brings new demands for preservice preparation of ECE teachers in universities or faculties. Until now, the emphasis of this preparation in the pedagogy course is more directed to primary education teaching. Less attention is given to ECE. With that, the professional competencies of the teachers have created various difficulties for planning good pedagogical routines in keeping with the new curricular perspective that emphasizes a holistic, child-centered perspective to ECE. The pedagogical point of view of many teachers remains centered on the adult, on the transmission of a pre-packaged culture, and on the installation and maintenance of discipline.

Based on what was said, it might be safe to say that the successful implementation of a Brazilian ECE curriculum requires a reorientation in the understanding that teachers have about young children’s development and the mediation processes for learning and development. This is a crucial factor in teacher preparation to meet the new approach to working with young Brazilian children from diverse cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.
Early Assessment and Childhood Outcomes

The evaluation of children in ECE units is a sensitive topic because of the factors already discussed: undefined curriculum issues across geographic regions and the cultural backgrounds of children and teacher preparation with respect to an understanding of children’s individual ways of learning, thinking, and expressing themselves. Currently some efforts are being made to enhance the delivery of quality teaching practices with new instruments of pedagogical evaluation. Programs for large-scale evaluation of the benefits young children accrue from attending ECE units are being discussed at the federal level with a lot of opposition related to the lack of empirical validity of the measures, considering the diverse cultural environments of young children in the country. Besides that, Brazil still has a formal educational culture of school failure and there is fear that this can influence the way children with different developmental patterns will be treated by the staff.

Assessment of ECE quality is devoted to the evaluation of the ECE unit conditions and teacher practices using more universal measures such as the ECERS and ITERS, with especial attention to their suitability to Brazilian reality. Returning to assessments of outcomes in children, I particularly think that the more teachers and the ECE staff improve on the daily social, cognitive, and physical experiences of children within a safe and nurturing environment, and observe and document children’s participation in them, the more productive and reliable ways to assess children’s learning and development will begin to emerge in Brazil.

Having said that, a World Bank Report (Evans & Kosec, 2012) on ECE in Brazil is quite instructive. A few of the positive impacts of ECE witnessed in the United States, Argentina, Chile, Europe, and Turkey (see Burger, 2010; Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Heckman et al., 2010; Schweinhart & Weikart, 2013) are now corroborated by findings from different regions of Brazil. The World Bank Report (Evans & Kosec, 2012), which described studies conducted in different regions of Brazil, the quality of the early childhood environment, and the cognitive and emotional experiences of children within them, suggests three major findings:

- Children in high-quality preschool programs (4–5-year-olds) in Campo Grande, Florianopolis, and Teresina demonstrated better second-grade intellectual outcomes (e.g., reading scores) than those enrolled in poor-quality programs. Quality was assessed by multiple indicators (adequate space, materials and lighting, educational materials such as books, puzzles, and blocks etc., attention to safety issues, sensitive and respectful teachers/caregivers, individual and small-group activities, regular dissemination of information to parents). Parallel outcomes were also noted for children enrolled in 100 creches (0–3 years) in the Rio de Janeiro area.
- The impact of ECE on social and cognitive development appears more pronounced for the poorest, most vulnerable children who may not have had the benefit of early stimulation through parental reading as would their more privileged counterparts with better material resources and less stressful home environments (see Votruba-Drzal, Miller, & Coley, 2015 for a discussion of these issues).
- The number of years of parents’ schooling appears to be associated with preschool gains in children. That is, children whose parents were illiterate showed more long-term gains than children whose parents had 4 years of schooling (0.6 years of life-time educational attainment compared to 0.4 years, respectively).

Together, these findings and those of other studies in the developed world (see Barnett, 2003; Burger, 2010; Schweinhart & Weikart, 2013) indicate a strong need to provide high-quality ECE services to the poorest children across Brazil. ECE services could act as a protective factor that may assist in turning the tide against cumulative decline in intellectual performance as children from poor households navigate the school systems amid economic and social challenges.
Future Directions

Without doubt, the ECE sectors need to improve the quality of their service delivery by providing experiential learning experiences that consider children’s developmental levels and diverse interests for a multi-ethnic populace. This effort will necessitate adequate methodologies for the mediation of self-care, self-organization, and self-image development of children. August bodies within and external (e.g., Evans & Kosec, 2012) to Brazil have made recommendations for improving the quality of ECE to young children. At the same time, much needed pre and post-ECE research is being conducted on the quality of preschool education, childhood social and cognitive outcomes, and teacher training (e.g., Chagas, 2010). Some of the future goals outlined by scholars and the World Bank Report (Evans & Kosec, 2012) for ECE in Brazil include but are not limited to the following:

- Greater focus on quality ECE services (e.g., center quality, teacher training, and activities) and additional funding per child for the disenfranchised poor across different geographic regions. FUNDEB (Brazilian Fund for the Development of Basic Education) has been involved in such efforts to equalize funding across municipalities.
- Improve on early education services by considering the needs of families and children from diverse cultural backgrounds with possible alternative ECE models for sparsely populated rural areas (e.g., home visiting programs or a mix of home- and center-based services). Existing models may have to be adapted for different ethnic/cultural groups to reflect best practices.
- There should be better monitoring systems for assuring delivery of quality ECE services and well-articulated licensing guidelines for municipalities. Include standardized assessments of the quality of early childhood programs on a routine basis (Evans & Kosec, 2012).
- Sharing of information and collaboration across ECE programs with multi-sectorial access to information on the diverse educational and health needs of children. This may include collaborations with the private sector (Evans & Kosec, 2012).
- Continue to improve on teacher training, particularly for those who work in creches (see Fukkink & Lont, 2007).
- Increase research efforts in the assessment of teacher and program quality and childhood outcomes as children transition to formal schooling.

References

Brazil (2014). Censo Escolar (School Census). Brasilia: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE)).
Brazil (2015). Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílio (PNAD). Brasilia: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE)).
Early Childhood Education in Brazil


