Content, comprehensiveness and coherence in policies for early childhood: how the curriculum can contribute

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Content, comprehensiveness and coherence in policies for early childhood: how the curriculum can contribute

Abstract: In the context of international agreements and commitments concerning early childhood, the purpose of this document is to review and renew the challenges that are involved in forging educational and curriculum policies for the first level of education. In the light of early childhood being increasingly included in the public agenda, countries are making sustained efforts to increase equity and quality in the design and implementation of policies for the early years. These are policies that are in the process of changing by including quality and participation criteria; fine-tuning monitoring and assessment mechanisms; going beyond the lack of sectoral and territorial coordination, among other limitations; moving from a needs-based approach to a rights-based approach; and adopting a comprehensive view. The document analyses, from a long-term public policy perspective, some of the challenges that second-generation policies face, positioning the curriculum as the articulating factor for the development of comprehensive policies for early childhood. Based on this, avenues are proposed on which to sustain policy definitions within the framework of the commitments of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, international declarations, agreements and goals promoted by international organizations on early childhood. To this end, five themes that have a direct impact on strengthening public policies with regard to the development and overall well-being in childhood have been identified. These are the conceptualization of public policies for early childhood with a rights-based and comprehensive approach; the complexity involved in discussing the conceptualization of curriculum as well as its design; non-conventional early childhood care and education provisions; the challenges facing early childhood teaching; and the conceptual frameworks that support comprehensive care initiatives as well some considerations on intersectoral work.

Keywords: Early childhood care and education – curriculum – rights-based approach – policies

Introduction

The aim of this document is to revisit and review the challenges involved in forging educational and curriculum policies for the first level of education.

As early childhood is increasingly being included in national public agendas, this document seeks to set out some fundamental reflections based on questions that have arisen from discussions on public policy, dilemmas regarding curricula and the approaches developed in those areas.

It proposes ways of formulating policy positions in the context of the commitments of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, international declarations, and the agreements and goals relating to early childhood that are being promoted by international organizations. In this regard, five thematic areas are discussed that have a direct impact on strengthening public policies with a focus on development and overall well-being in childhood.

The first chapter covers the design of public policies for early childhood, focusing on rights and comprehensiveness. It proposes a typology of policies to promote quality and equity in education along with the essential factors for their implementation. Looking to the future, it analyses some of the challenges that are associated with second-generation policies and presents the curriculum as the cornerstone for the development of comprehensive policies for early childhood.

The second chapter, taking into account the complexity involved in discussing the conceptualization of curriculum, provides some definitions, reference frameworks and fundamental elements that are part of the debate on curriculum for early childhood education. In the same vein, this analysis is supplemented with a few distinctions regarding curriculum structures that are used in curriculum benchmarks for early childhood education.

The third chapter explores the provision of non-conventional early childhood care and education. It discusses the issues regarding its goals, categories, attributes and the need to standardize quality while preserving its defining features.

The fourth chapter addresses the challenges facing early childhood teaching. It covers a number of points of analysis concerning teachers' profiles, their work place, and their role, along with a brief analysis of policies on the professionalization and social value of teaching. A set of considerations to further strengthen professional development is also proposed.

Lastly, the fifth chapter presents some observations on the conceptual frameworks that support comprehensive care initiatives and some considerations on intersectoral work. It also examines the purpose and aims of work in regional networks and considers comprehensive national child protection systems. Finally, a set of challenges with a view to continuing to give effect to the rights of the child from an inclusive perspective is outlined.

Chapter I

Public policies relating to comprehensive early childhood development

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The first chapter covers the design of public policies for early childhood, focusing on rights and comprehensiveness. It proposes a typology of policies to promote quality and equity in education along with the essential factors for their implementation. Looking to the future, it analyses some of the challenges that are associated with second-generation policies and presents the curriculum as the cornerstone for the development of comprehensive policies for early childhood.

Scope concerning the concept of public policies for early childhood

The framework of international agreements and commitments, concerning the challenges to enhance better quality and more equity in early childhood policies, has resulted in sustained efforts by countries towards effective design and implementation of policies for early childhood. These policies are in the process of changing; quality and participation criteria are being incorporated, their monitoring and assessment mechanisms are being perfected, and the lack of coordination at the sectoral and regional levels is being addressed, among other obstacles, thus moving from a needs-based approach to a rights-based approach by taking a comprehensive view.

The public policies relating to comprehensive early childhood development acquire various sectoral and regional expressions in line with the vision and commitments of countries regarding the role of the state, the concept of childhood, and the role of family and civil society.

When talking about such public policies, an allusion is made to the promotion of consensus and shared meaning through a set of mechanisms or actions. These are put into operation in programmes, institutional modifications, standards, monitoring instruments and financing, among other things, and will have positive outcomes during the implementation process, providing there is consistency with the overall objective of the policy.

In this regard, the role of sound public policies is to clearly interpret the overarching policy objective as ensuring the full development of all children.

It is therefore fundamental that the overall objective of child policy is defined in line with the view of the state, society, family and children, in order for public policies that are aimed at learning and the full development and well-being of children to be fully workable.

A sound public policy must be created through a participation process and it should include, in its design, a conceptual framework with clarifications or definitions, operational mechanisms, deadlines, a description of the outcomes and related assessments.

Typology of policies to foster quality and equity in education

Within public policies aimed at promoting and guaranteeing quality education from early childhood, there is a set of classifications that, from a rights-based approach, can be defined, organized, and mainstreamed in line with the specific objectives that are considered to be priorities. Below, is an example of a typology of public policies aimed at comprehensive child development that meet the requirements for quality and equity in education.

1. Policies on **regulatory frameworks**: these include all the provisions of a regulatory nature that help ensure rights, comply with requirements and standardized criteria relating to equity, and cover, for example, principles of inclusion – from the development of legal frameworks of draft legislation to the adoption of regulations.

2. **Financing** policies: these cover the costing of measures that are to be implemented, the resources that will be available on a permanent basis, the investment per child, the systems and financing models, and the criteria that would be used, for example, for the equitable distribution of resources or for ordering priorities, which are particularly complex for early childhood.

3. **Institution building** policies: these are related to all definitions, approaches and actions that aim to improve the efficiency of institutions in the light of objectives, goals and commitments that have been established for the comprehensive well-being in early childhood. They include, among others, the creation of bodies (such as governing bodies and councils for childhood), the structure of the sector, the mechanisms for coordination and decentralized administration, the establishment of new operational structures or their realignment, and intersectoral work. The strategic aim is to strengthen the state's capacity to promote and guarantee comprehensive education from an early age.

4. Policies for **ensuring the quality of the provision of early childhood education**: these include provisions, mechanisms and organizational structures to support, accompany, evaluate and steer the management of educational processes with solutions that take into account diversity in the framework of universal guarantees. The improved quality of educational services presents a fundamental challenge in creating relevant and meaningful learning opportunities.

5. Policies for **teacher development**: these address needs that range from optimizing working conditions to improving the recognition and social value of teachers. They take into consideration the drafting and fine-tuning of legal frameworks that regulate vocational courses, and the updating of curricula for specialized training, national plans to access initial training, induction, in-service training, retention and promotion.

6. Policies for **curriculum development**: these cover the design and updating of curriculum benchmarks specific to early childhood. They are guiding principles that are created based on national consultation and consensus. In the context of building the desired society, the purpose of these policies is to provide information regarding the purpose of teaching, the content being taught and, directly or indirectly, how it is to being taught. The content of these policies focuses on ethical guidelines; foundations that derive from the field of pedagogy, philosophy and neuroscience, among others; learning objectives; organizational structures; and implementation and evaluation strategies in contexts involving diversity.

Overarching reference framework for early childhood policies

The overarching framework that guides and calls for policies for early childhood is the Convention on the Rights of the Child.[1] It is a recognized international treaty that has been widely ratified by countries, achieving global consensus on the need to join efforts to enforce all the rights that are fundamental for the full development of children.

Specific guidelines for early childhood are drawn upon this treaty, such as the General Comment No. 7 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, whose purpose is to ensure compliance with the mandate of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. The right to education in the Convention is interpreted as starting at birth, which therefore requires countries to provide early childhood care and education, especially to the most vulnerable groups.

The fundamental principles of the Convention argue for the best interest of the child to be part of all policy implementation frameworks. This should guarantee the right to survival, development, protection, participation and non-discrimination.

Likewise, in terms of equal opportunities that countries should promote for the full development of children, the right to education stands out. This right includes not only the creation of conditions for access to different forms of care, but also the establishment of conditions that guarantee quality education at the various stages of childhood, including early childhood. It must be ensured that, for early childhood, care and education, policies are designed as an asset in the public interest and as a social right.

It is important to highlight that the growing body of scientific evidence on the importance of education from birth has generated, in recent decades, a number of international agreements that focus on the overall improvement of educational opportunities in relation to early childhood. Through these commitments, it is assumed that learning starts at birth and it is, therefore, necessary to protect all aspects that promote protective and enriching environments in order to ensure full development (Dakar Framework for Action, 2000; Moscow Framework for Action and Cooperation, 2010; World Declaration on Education for All, Jomtien, 1990).

In honour of the commitments set out in the international treaties with a rights-based approach, States have implemented initiatives at various levels of the system, ranging from proposals and legislative adjustments, to financing measures and institution building, which are part of early childhood policies and programmes.

In terms of public policy for early childhood from a rights-based perspective, it must be borne in mind that resources, services and programmes seeking to respond to comprehensive care, need to be articulated and organized in a coordinated manner, given the wide range of factors that influence the effectiveness of implementation frameworks for the full and comprehensive development of children. Given this comprehensive aspect, the State is responsible to optimize intersectoral work through mechanisms and provisions that consider the vertical and horizontal integration of actions at different administrative levels.

When generating the conditions for the design and implementation mechanisms, the Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes a rights-based approach that requires an ecological or systemic approach. Indeed, one of the characteristics of the systemic approach is the reciprocal and permanent influence exerted on the various environments within which people interact. Therefore, family, community and society are built in the ecological environment, where there is a dynamic of interrelationships, namely the interplay between biological and experiential factors that favour or limit the comprehensive development of children.

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[1] UNICEF. 1989. *Convention on the Rights of the Child of 20 November 1989*. UNICEF-Committee.

Key factors for the implementation of policies

The State, in its role as the guarantor of the right to education, has the ethical and legal responsibility to create the conditions for the implementation of policies for early childhood. It is a task that must be shared with civil society as a whole. Therefore, stakeholders, sectors and local authorities should be involved, to allow for different perspectives, responsibilities and specializations to be combined, so that they legitimately contribute to its design and implementation. It is therefore essential to look at the different mechanisms of citizen participation in various spaces, and with various methodologies and communication strategies, that not only inform the objectives, processes and results, but are also motivating, inclusive and empowering.

The establishment of mechanisms to increase participation in drawing up policies that recognize children as subjects of law, leads to a greater commitment and ownership of the various initiatives as well as to a strengthened need for continuity in policies, taking into account institutional and financial aspects, among other strategic areas.

Similarly, institutional rights-based systems are one of the tools used by countries for the development of policies that see children as social actors. In this sense, it is necessary to strengthen all the factors that influence a fluid institutional structure, such as sectoral and intersectoral coordination, in order to ensure compatibility between, for example, the discourse on quality education as a right and effective implementation.

It is therefore worth noting that it is not only necessary to optimize the coordination and cooperation mechanisms at the system's organizational level, but also to define the concepts that furnish policies with a vision. Such policies include the type of society we want to build, the objectives and purposes of education, the expectations related to policies and the understanding of childhood.

On the basis of these concepts, shared understanding is created in various structures and at various administrative levels. This shared understanding ensures relevance and coherence, and shapes the components involved in the processes and outcomes of implementing policies that seek to guarantee the right to education and care from early childhood, such as the definition and articulation of strategies, instruments, and types of financing.

Moreover, an essential factor for the implementation of public policies that focus on the comprehensive well-being of children is adjusting legal and regulatory frameworks to the overarching policy objective, which would enable the regulation, protection and steering of administrative procedures in a coherent and consistent manner.

To summarize, at least three key factors for the implementation of public policies can be identified: spaces for participation, coordinated institutional work and coherent legal frameworks.

Challenges concerning the design and implementation of second-generation education policies for early childhood

In addition to the principles, policies and strategies defined in various legal instruments at the international level, as well as to the agreements reached at presidential summits and goals promoted by international organizations for early childhood, there are still institutional and sociocultural practices that do not address current paradigms that characterize the importance of building comprehensive policies to advance care and quality education from the earliest years.

Indeed, despite the growing and significant efforts that countries have made to incorporate early childhood in their public agenda, important challenges remain that hinder collaborative, efficient, relevant and organized political governance.

These challenges range from conceptual matters, such as visions, rationales and focuses that characterize education policies for early childhood, to the procedural aspects and support involved in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all these policy actions.

Aiming to strengthen and improve comprehensive policies, a set of basic ideas is presented below in the form of challenges. These ideas facilitate in reviewing and analysing the various actions being undertaken to advance care and quality education in early childhood.

- **Assessing the current situation regarding childhood:** care and education policies must address the rights, needs and current interests of children. While the early stages of life are key and may positively influence the child's future development, childhood should not only be perceived as preparation for adulthood. By considering children as subjects of law, the first years of life acquire value and identity in their own right.

- **Recognizing the diversity of contexts:** education and care policies must go beyond a homogeneous, instrumental and mechanistic view. They must incorporate a deeper understanding of the system, which recognizes and examines the educational, social and cultural reality. This approach takes into account other aspects, such as intersectoral coordination, participation and the presence of other actors and more subjective views. In other words, it is important to consider that not all initiatives or actions of education policies for early childhood can be encompassing and uniform. It is therefore necessary to enhance, for example, the diversity of non-formal offers, examining their anthropological and pedagogical foundations as well as the quality of their responses based on regional labour, diversity and inclusion criteria.

- **Balancing care and education:** education and care policies should be geared towards the comprehensive well-being of children. As such, all implementation frameworks, which are designed to pursue public policies aimed at developing the potentialities in early childhood, make provision for care and education as complementary, interrelating dimensions, when learning experiences are planned and carried out. This view suggests rethinking the welfarist and compensatory programmes that focus only on hygiene, nutrition, development of habits and remedial actions.

- **Safeguarding equity and quality:** care and education policies must incorporate mechanisms to improve equity in educational services as well as basic quality. While quality is a dynamic and contextualized concept, it should be taken into consideration by the State when defining regulations and minimum standards. In this regard, recognizing the efforts towards synthesis of authors and specialized agencies for the age groups 0 to 3 and 3 to 6, the early childhood sector has agreed on a number of quality criteria for the operation of educational services and good teaching practices. Both equity and quality crystallize when policies are consistent and articulated, and sufficient resources are allocated for their implementation.

- **Recognizing that the period from zero to three years has educational value:** care and education policies should take into account that learning opportunities arise from birth. There has traditionally been a tendency to consider ages 0 to 3 as a time for care and not education. Many programmes and public policy initiatives disregard the educational value of this period, which also affects its inclusion in the institutional set-up.

Often, in the public agenda, policy focuses on meeting the requirements of maternity protection and preventive health programmes. This understanding of what is expected of services that provide care for the first cycle of early childhood results in these services being administratively and financially dependent on social, community and health organizations. Curricula for this age group focus mainly on certain developmental milestones, thus influencing consistency and continuity in the development and learning of children.

Along these current challenges, another significant challenge **is the perception of the curriculum as the cornerstone for the development of comprehensive policies for early childhood**.

In the same vein, Tedesco, Opertti and Amadio note that "[…] curriculum can be considered as a means to providing content and coherence to education policies" (Tedesco *et al.*, 2013, p.2).

Curriculum benchmarks can be powerful tools for developing visions and content, as well as underpinning policies for early childhood. This can be sustained and fostered, since the vast majority of countries have been making progress in the design of curriculum frameworks for early childhood education.

When it comes to designing policy actions, a policy that reflects the debate on curriculum is more coherent and relevant. For example, criteria, principles and learning objectives can be the driving force of intersectoral policies. Educational intentions are set out in these objectives, guiding various initiatives for childhood.

In this regard, it is important to note that the curriculum is conceived as a framework that reflects social and political consensus regarding the 'why', 'what' and 'how' of education and learning. In short, the curriculum reflects the type of society we want to build.

Chapter II

The curriculum in early childhood education: conceptual scope and differences

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This chapter, taking into account the complexity involved in discussing curriculum as a concept, sets out some definitions, reference frameworks and fundamental elements that are part of the debate on the curriculum for early childhood education. In the same vein, this analysis is supplemented with a few distinctions regarding curriculum structures that are used in curriculum benchmarks for early childhood.

Scope of the conceptualization of the curriculum

Curriculum is a concept that can be defined in many ways, as many as each society deems fit. These meanings depend on the purposes and perspectives that are established for the type of project that is pursued.

Curriculum in the Latin sense of the term is linked to a trajectory, a journey or a path; the action of moving through time and space, however, unsurprisingly, is marked by a direction and a goal, which are essentially the result of multiple transactions and consensus.

Taking into account the polysemy of the concept, its multiple meanings are based on distinct rationales, approaches and traditions. From certain traditional positions, a curriculum is a prescriptive instrument that standardizes and presents the official position in writing, determining what should be taught and how it should be taught. It is as an external standard to the educational institution; it is closed in nature and prescribes what to do. In this sense, a curriculum is often used as a term homologous to a study programme or syllabus.

This approach interprets educational reality as a definite, predictable and controllable reality, and, also presents teachers in a subordinate role, whereby they only apply what was designed by someone else.

Based on this, it could be particularly complex to discuss the curriculum in early childhood education. If one of the main focuses of this concept is seeking effective methods to generate models to design and plan actions, this would imply that the curriculum is a devise that conveys knowledge rather than develops skills.

In contrast to a technical or analytical-empirical approach, the "New School", a progressive movement with innovative teaching proposals, arose at the beginning of the 20th century. It focuses primarily on teaching practice and the role of the educator, who is perceived as creating situations and being responsible for making pedagogical decisions autonomously.

This approach is based upon the idea that education is an ongoing process of reconstruction and co-construction of the individual's knowledge, and not just a process that replicates knowledge and defined and static values.

In the case of early childhood education, this way of conceiving the curriculum has a special meaning. Focusing on the educational purpose and understanding of the phenomena that contribute to teaching and learning processes provides the purposes and foundations for what teaching practice in early childhood education seeks to develop and express.

The above shows the impact of the epistemological sources that feed into the definition of curriculum on the decisions, reflections, direction and types of analysis that are projected in the various curricular and instructional components.

Indeed, the conceptualization of the curriculum can be interpreted in different ways depending on the various educational theories, epistemological foundations, processes and historical movements in pedagogy, as well as the requirements and role of education in society.

In this context, the definition of curriculum depends on the analytical focus. Therefore, some authors focus on the outcome of the education system, whereas others focus on structural components, and yet others emphasize the key processes that trigger the choice of a particular curriculum model.

The various dimensions that are incorporated in the conceptualization of the curriculum are presented below. This is achieved through a set of clarifications that are based on the idea of curriculum as an expression of public policy, which collects, selects and organizes the cultural knowledge acquired by children and young people at various levels of education:

- The curriculum is adopted as the roadmap that guides teaching practices. This national instrument can be defined as the first level of anticipation and organization of the contents of learning process and respective teaching strategies.
- The curriculum is conceived as a conceptual framework that reflects the purpose of teaching, the learning content and, directly or indirectly, the teaching method.
- The curriculum formalizes the learning content and articulates the definitions of education policies with the pedagogical processes developed in educational institutions.
- Developing a curriculum involves defining and agreeing on a range of sources, including sociocultural, psychological, educational foundations and other recent developments from the field of neuroscience, for example. Because of the significant overlap between the selection, organization, distribution and transmission of culturally relevant content through which the curriculum is implemented and the social, ethical and political considerations, a complex system of filters and consensus is required.
- A curriculum benchmark or framework includes a set of coherent and ordered guidelines and criteria at the national level. "[Curriculum frameworks] include statements related to the underpinning principles and core values, general objectives, learning achievement expectations, and guidelines concerning the organization of the teaching and learning process as well as assessment methods […]" (Tedesco *et al.*, 2013, p. 9).
- In line with the above, the curriculum in early childhood education is conceived in the classroom as the child's learning experiences. The repertoire of learning experiences offered by educational institutions moves away from an official curriculum platform. Ultimately it is about putting into practice the basics, pedagogical principles, objectives and learning content that are set out in official documents.

Reference framework for the design of the curriculum for childhood education

In the last few decades, the rights-based focus has become especially important in early childhood education. According to this view, the state assumes and takes responsibility, through the curriculum, for the child's right to education.

The aim of this approach is to integrate the legal and ethical principles of human rights into public policy and development practices. It involves going from practices and policies focused on the basic needs of "target populations" (in this case children), to actions aimed at recognizing the rights of every individual. Thus, the objective is more than meeting the needs of individuals or groups but rather contributing to and ensuring the realization of their rights. This distinction is central because it changes the role and responsibility of institutions regarding the quality and equity of educational opportunities provided for children, among other things.

In essence, the view of children as subjects of law involves recognizing them as key actors in their own development and learning as well as enhancing their characterization as subjects of early childhood education. More specifically this means:

- Acknowledging children's active role in their learning processes, promoting their initiative, according to the possibilities that characterize this stage of development;
- Recognizing their legitimate right to participate in decisions that affect them;
- Considering them as unique individuals, who have relationships with others and are constantly developing their identities;
- Recognizing them as individuals who are part of a context; they belong to a given time, place and culture, and are able to transform their environment and themselves.

Thus, there is a high degree of compatibility between a curriculum that gives prominence to learning experiences and a rights-based approach; children are at the centre of both perspectives. Hence, where the curriculum emphasizes the concept of learning experiences in which children can decide, participate, play, build, explore and discuss, among other things, are especially relevant. These opportunities become the heart of the educational process and, consequently, of the curriculum, reaffirming children's right to education.

Perspectives on the understanding of quality in the curriculum for early childhood education

To open the discussion on quality in the curriculum, two concepts that are diametrically opposed in terms of content will be used as sources of analysis. We will consider quality taking, first, a simple approach and, then, a complex approach.

Each approach refers to different paradigms, which are, as it can currently be observed, unfolding in different contexts across the world. While it is true that there is a kind of hegemony of the paradigm of simplicity when it comes to understanding quality in early childhood education, the complex or postmodern paradigm has emerged with force in countries with high educational achievement (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2005).

Morín (1998) defines simplicity as the search to reduce reality to a specialized and partial vision underpinned by the belief that order can be reduced or achieved with the formulation of a law. As a result, analytical and planning processes are highly valued. The author claims that simplicity covers the unique and the multiple, but not that the unique can, at the same time, be multiple. Simplicity, and its significant impact on educational processes, operates at two levels: it separates what is linked (analyses, distinguishes variables, seeks to explain the relationships between them) or unifies what is different (standardizing, losing sight of singularity and diversity).

The complex thinking, on the other hand, assumes and considers uncertainty. It establishes that humans and their interactions are essentially "non-trivial" and it is therefore not possible to explain or anticipate human events with certainty. It attempts to identify how things are linked, taking into account the multidimensionality of knowledge. Thus, it recognizes and conceives reality as a complex whole, which cannot be reduced to an absolute truth or a set of bounded variables. This undoubtedly encapsulates the challenge of educating using an approach that takes diversity into account.

The 'simple approach' can lead to the risk of thinking and recognizing the curriculum as referring only to what is prescribed for the purposes of what happens in early childhood education without considering the consequences, possible interpretations and different meanings. However, curriculum is much more than a prescribed course of action. Thus, when thinking about the topic, quality should be considered from other perspectives, as the paradigm of complexity proposes.

In the complex thinking approach, quality is closely linked to the idea of creating a shared sense of what is valuable and important to a specific community. In this case, with the participation of all members of the educational community, the curriculum presents an opportunity to define what is considered relevant and important so that it can be passed on to and built with new generations. Thus, the discussion on curriculum makes it possible to share a vision about the meaning and purpose of education; in this case, what early childhood seeks to achieve, which is the prerequisite to agreeing on a definition of quality in early childhood education.

In the simple thinking approach, the curriculum and the work of educational institutions for early childhood are articulated around an efficiency model, which is mobilized only to "produce" specific "outcomes or results". This, therefore, produces the image of the child as an "empty vessel to be filled", or the idea of someone weak, dependent and in need. Similarly, educational communities are limited to the role of implementers.

Based on the complex thinking approach, when referring to quality, the design of curriculum presents a broad and flexible space. This space can be discussed and supplemented, as it allows for essential definitions, such as social contracts. Curriculum design is also part of a vision of childhood and is responsible for achieving that vision. Therefore, the various actors are perceived as key players in defining the curriculum.

This approach takes into consideration the characteristics of communities, both regional and educational, while children remain at its centre. It includes formal teachers and educational professionals, but also families and other state institutions.

The curriculum is presented as an enriching space because of the manifold experiences for children (such as activities, relationships and interactions), which promotes the co-construction of knowledge and identity. It promotes and strengthens informed, reflective and critical participation and the development of social networks (between children, adults and children, and adults).

This approach informs the idea of children as active co-constructors of both their knowledge and that of others. They are agents that are able to work together, explore their world, generate meaning and express themselves. In short, children, as subjects of law, have the opportunity to fully enjoy their rights.

Principles that guide pedagogy in early childhood education

Pedagogical principles can be defined as *"the foundation",* or the basis of pedagogy of and for young children. They help organize work around a common vision of how young children learn and how these learning processes should be promoted. As a result, these principles allow us to establish a shared matrix between the participants in pedagogical and didactic decisions.

It could be argued that their implications guide the work of educational agents based on common conceptual and value-based benchmarks. These benchmarks have particular characteristics that identify young children and the learning processes at this stage of development. They also enable the identification (and therefore the prescription) of certain conditions that promote the effectiveness of educational action in the classroom, thereby constituting criteria that enable reflection on the actual practice.

Because they are general benchmarks, these principles can feasibly be implemented in a wide range of educational situations. Consequently, they describe and prescribe the basic, necessary characteristics of various interactions within the learning experience (interactions between children and adults, adults and young children, children and educational materials), various mediation strategies and ways of organizing working groups.

In the various curriculum benchmarks, a number of founding principles can be identified that derive from the tradition of early childhood education around the world, the contributions of teachers and teaching pioneers, their concepts, experiences and work. These principles stem from a constructivist approach to learning and pedagogical action in the widest sense. Among them, play, unity, and individuality stand out.

Moreover, in response to social changes and requirements, additional principles have emerged, such as the principles of well-being, transcendence and citizenship.

All of these principles, help guide teaching practice through a shared vision of how children learn and how teaching should be designed. They reflect social and educational demands and requirements that need to be translated and turned into curriculum proposals for early childhood.

Approaches to development, learning and teaching in early childhood education

The concepts of teaching, learning and development are at the heart of the discussion on early childhood education curriculum. Depending on the definition of these concepts, the curriculum approach could be understood as influencing the various pedagogical practices in early childhood education. Some essential concepts are therefore considered which can later be coordinated.

In order to gauge the complexity of the task in various early childhood education institutions, it is necessary to coherently show the relationships between development, learning and teaching.

Learning is understood as an active process of interaction between the individual and the environment, which occurs throughout life and in every moment of human experience. Knowledge is the result of transactions between these numerous experiences that are shaped by both their subjective and objective elements. We could, therefore, say that learning is the process of knowledge creation. Learning can thus be conceived as a process where ideas are formed and reformulated through experience.

A range of theories and models have been developed to understand learning. In the context of this document, it is pertinent to refer to Decroly (1986), who defines three stages of the learning process:

1. Observation of the environment, such as objects;
2. Association between objects, contents, properties or the recognition of similar past situations;
3. Expression and communication of the content learnt (it incorporates the analysis of what happened so that current experiences acquire meaning).

This approach clearly incorporates various components of reflection (observation, analysis, analogy, synthesis, projection) that emphasize the relationship between practice and the feedback it creates on the basis of awareness of their characteristics, limits and scope. In the premise proposed by Decroly and other authors, such as Dewey, learning is presented as a dialectical process that integrates experience and concepts, observation and action. It is also worth adding that this is a process in which the individual's learning interests are centred around their personal history and views about who they are and what they can or want to do (subjective and motivational processes).

Based on the above, learning emerges as a capacity used every day to adapt our responses to the needs and challenges arising from our interaction with our environment. It is therefore argued that learning is a never-ending process; it involves constantly making sense and grasping the meaning of the world around us. Learning involves developing a body of skills (in order to learn), which comprises cognitive, social and emotional elements and allows us to achieve the goal of living in society.

Regarding the teaching process, by using the educator's pedagogical action to aid the child's possibilities for discovery and investigation in early childhood education, teaching practices have been selected and understood in different ways.

Within these different views on teaching practices in early childhood education, the link with the concept of effective pedagogies [with a strong emphasis on play] has emerged. In other words, creating learning environments (such as spaces, materials and interactions) for the child, also involves certain essential conditions, such as play, exploration and expression (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2012).

Thus, teaching in early childhood education is defined based on the processes that occur in the classroom with the intention of initiating or maintaining processes that effectively promote children creating the learning outcomes. The teacher does not transmit or impart specific knowledge, but rather provides environments and experiences from which the child learns by building upon their prior knowledge (Bassedas *et al.*, 2005; Coll, 1992).

In this regard, it is interesting to consider some of Freire's (2006) reflections: first, the conviction that it is impossible to separate teaching from learning, and education from becoming educated. According to Freire, it is not feasible to "divorce existing knowledge from the act of creating knowledge". This is especially relevant to early childhood education, where processes such as learning and teaching interrelate in a profound dialectical sense.

Child development is therefore considered as a continuous and progressive process, through which the child acquires increasingly complex skills, knowledge and behaviours. We can see that this is at the core of the learning process. It includes not only the growth and maturing of different biological systems but all of the child's abilities. It involves the constant interaction and feedback of factors that are specific to the child, and their environment and experiences.

This concept has been defined through different prisms, which, depending on the area of study and specificity, emphasize particular dimensions. Yet, despite this diversity, there is consensus: the first years of life are crucial to the development of the various cognitive, sensory, physical, emotional and social skills and capabilities of children.

Within this diversity, there are definitions that link the concept of child development to the notion of human capital; these definitions emphasize the importance of having a set of basic skills when starting elementary school. This not only includes verbal and intellectual skills and knowledge, but also social skills. This conception of child development shows that the child is ready to participate in the family, community and society in general. The main criticism of this perspective is that it refers to the idea of a "subsystem", whose relationships with the environment are defined almost exclusively in terms of the future.

A different and opposed view on child development can be found in the holistic perspective. Amar (2004) points out that development is the "process through which the biological being turns into a social and cultural being". In other words, development can be seen as the realization of the biological, social and cultural potential of each person. The author refers to two ideas:

- Each person is the main actor in their development;
- Each stage of this process is valuable and responds to the biopsychosocial unit in which each subject is formed.

Despite their specificities, all definitions have certain elements in common: the notion of construction, and the idea of increasing levels of complexity and interaction with the environment.

Consequently, from a constructivist point of view – namely recognizing that knowledge is a social construct based on the dynamic interaction of individuals with their environment –education should precede development and, to some extent, guide it. Similarly, learning should be considered in relation to progress regarding development (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2012).

Interaction of all kinds, but especially social interaction that promotes learning, should take place in the zone of proximal development as social constructivists call it. This is the difference between problems a child could resolve without help (actual level of development) and with the help or guidance of someone more advanced (potential level of development). In the social interaction that characterizes this type of education, the educator is the "more advanced" participant who has already "internalized" socially shared meanings through curriculum (through its instruments, experiences and educational materials) and should try to get the child to also share these. This process, which is easy to describe, is extremely complex to undertake in practice.

Placing teaching in the zone of proximal development is, as Freire (2006) highlights, a major challenge for teachers. Educators must always start from – but only start and not stay at – the child's level of understanding; their understanding of the environment and observation of the reality.

Quality criteria in early childhood education

The approaches to quality in early childhood education and the concepts concerning the curriculum have been the subjects of significant debate among experts in the sector. Some basic, but not holistic, consensus has been reached at the international level regarding quality factors. These factors are organized into various categories, such as an emphasis on structure, process, results and curriculum guidelines (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2012; OECD, 2012; Tietze, 2010). Below, three of these are briefly described.

1. Quality of the structure: it includes technical coefficient of adults to children, infrastructure, training of educators and experts, safe physical environments, classroom size, equipment and teaching materials available, number of children per classroom, children's age and working conditions of teaching staff;
2. Quality of educational processes: it describes actual educational practice, interactions between children and adults or among children. This includes, for example, the climate of interaction, levels of participation, the way adults treat children and the way children are stimulated in different areas of learning;
3. Quality of curriculum guidelines: it relates to the benchmarks and programmes that guide educational work. It involves conceptualizing childhood and children, the beliefs of educators, the role of educational communities, support networks, the pedagogical conceptualization of the institution and the role of families. In short, all the visions and foundations that characterize curriculum guidelines.

These factors, categorized as structure, processes and curriculum, are continuously interacting at all stages of pedagogical work. While each factor has different predictive weights regarding quality, each has a direct impact on teaching conditions and the generation of effective learning opportunities.

It is especially important to emphasize that curriculum guidelines and benchmarks take on a special meaning in teaching practice, which is ultimately translated into the roadmap that informs curriculum and didactic decisions.

Regarding this process of curriculum construction and the subsequent levels of curriculum design that take place in educational centres, more specifically the classroom, some challenges in this area are presented below. These challenges understand the curriculum as an expression of public policy that reflects the purpose of teaching, the learning content and, directly or indirectly, the teaching method.

Initial reflections on the curriculum categories into which early childhood educational objectives are organized

As noted above, the curriculum in early childhood education is closely linked to learning, development and teaching processes.

Recognizing the importance of this triad, it is worth stating that learning is central in early childhood curriculum regarding the structure and organization of curriculum benchmarks in early childhood education.

In this regard, some points and criteria for the definition of learning content in early childhood education are set out below.

The first point is that the design of curricula for early childhood education is increasingly incorporating conceptual contents that cut across different components of the curriculum framework. The following components stand out: (i) understanding of the learning process and its relation to child development, (ii) understanding of the characteristics of early childhood education, and (iii) characteristics of educational institutions for early childhood.

A complex exercise of reconceptualization is present in each component that, in addition to updating the categories and the understanding of sociocultural contexts, seeks to integrate other analytical frameworks, in order to appropriately cover teaching practices. This is how, for example, it has been possible to gradually overcome certain rigid universalist perspectives regarding child development (i.e. linear stages or phases of development).

Indeed, while acknowledging that there are common milestones in child development, the aim is to recognize and value diversity.

In contrast, following the same reconceptualization criteria, it is worth analysing how the subject of early childhood education influences the identity of the educational institution for early childhood.

For example, recognizing young children as agents of their own development, instead of "passive recipients of products and services they are provided with", involves promoting certain levels of participation, commensurate with their stage of development and learning possibilities. It also means recognizing that, given the characteristics of this stage of development, families play a fundamental role in these processes.

It must be borne in mind that the way we see others has an effect on the way we and others act. This is put into actual practice starting with how we refer to the other ("subject of law" or "object of protection"). Therefore, one essential criterion in determining the curriculum for early childhood education and structure is the formulation of ideas and key questions. Who is the subject of early childhood education? What are their characteristics? How do they learn? And, what are the "basics" in nursery pedagogy? These questions are fundamental.

These are the basic questions in order to start thinking about the curriculum structure of each society and education system. There are, obviously, multiple answers; as many as the societies, cultures and education systems that seek to answer them.

In the context of this document, a coherent answer, the focus and perspective of which are presented below, can be found in the proposals of the Delors Report "Learning: The Treasure Within", on which the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century sets out its work (1996). It refers to a series of tensions that must be overcome in order for humanity to build a common future. This essentially means placing lifelong learning at the heart of every society, reconsidering and coordinating the various stages involved.

This document recognizes a number of extremely complex issues that affect various countries and one of the ideas that emerges, which is particularly significant for early childhood education, is that of trying to steer formative processes towards overall human development.

The above presupposes building the educational process around four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be.

- *Learning to know*: it involves learning by appropriately combining broad general knowledge with the possibility of deepening knowledge in more specific areas. This process also means learning to learn in order to effectively benefit from lifelong learning opportunities. In that regard, the metacognitive processes that focus on being aware of the learning processes are crucial, for each individual to decide how, when and on what grounds to use their skills.
- *Learning to do*: it involves going beyond education as a mere training process and moving towards the notion of competence. In other words, it is a learning process that empowers individuals to cope with the many situations that make up life in our complex societies and to work as a team.
- *Learning to live together*: it involves developing an understanding of the other and the idea of multiple forms of interdependence based on the values of pluralism, mutual understanding and peace. It involves learning to live with and getting to know others and sharing common goals.
- *Learning to be*: it involves learning in order to encourage every individual's full potential: memory, reasoning, aesthetic sense, physical abilities, communication skills, etc. This pillar involves shaping each individual so that they are able to act with independence, judgement and personal responsibility.

The report concludes that even though formal education systems tend to prioritize the acquisition of knowledge, at the expense of other forms of learning, it is important to view education as a whole. This holistic view of education must be the source of inspiration and guidance for educational reforms, as well as the development of programmes and the definition of new education policies.

From a perspective of change, these four pillars could present coherent and relevant answers to the question: what are the aims of early childhood education? However, it should be borne in mind, going beyond the approach that is subscribed to, that the type of learning we want for children must be meaningful. This meaning derives from these questions: who is the child today? What type of society is the child living in and what type of society are we aspiring?

Thus, as Tonucci (2006, p. 18) comments *"in preschool, children should learn to be together, get along with their peers, share their experiences and emotions, express, using language, their preferences, observe reality, marvel at new things, look for answers, listen and work together"*.

In line with this view, it is worth highlighting that early childhood education institutions are dynamic systems that have changed over time, depending on the characteristics and needs of their surrounding context.

Indeed, in addition to the links and interactions of all those connected to kindergartens, crèches or nursery schools (the name differs from country to country), there are certain cultural, social, economic and political patterns associated with the macro system within which an institution exists.

It is desirable to think of kindergarten or nursery school as an institution that is part of and linked to these patterns at the local, national and global levels. In this sense, it is permanently exposed to the processes within its respective systems. The above description regarding educational institutions for early childhood also applies to the curriculum for early childhood, as this is the foundation and core of the institution's identity (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2012).

Thus, in examining aspects relating to the curriculum for early childhood education and with the aim of proposing structures that organize and group learning objectives, a series of concepts such as nuclei, environments, sectors, areas or fields has been developed. They all seek to give a relational, dynamic and integral character to the processes of child development and learning.

It should be noted that these groupings, in addition to ordering and establishing differences in the curriculum in order to guide formative processes, are intended to go beyond traditional classifications that use patterns of developmental psychology.

Curriculum categories in early childhood education, regardless of their name, should establish a relationship between learning and development considering that this relationship is based on the interaction of internal factors (biological and psychological) and external factors (social and cultural) that come into play when the child acts in a learning situation.

By participating in learning experiences, toddlers use various skills, such as emotional and social, cognitive and linguistic, and psychomotor skills, which create feedback loops. Learning therefore involves various areas simultaneously in the learning situations that are created for the child. While it is true that, based on the kind of intervention by the educator, it is possible to see where the emphasis is placed in the learning experience, it is only an emphasis.

To summarize, curriculum organization for early childhood education may:

- interrelate development and learning processes;
- systemize and organize educational work;
- lighten the pedagogical role of the educator by providing him/her with guidance in the learning activities;
- enable children to construct meaning based on and make sense of their learning experiences.

The concept of cycles in early childhood education

By taking the rights-based approach whereby children are the cornerstone of curriculum and childhood policies, the State, family and society as a whole take on the role of guarantors of these rights. This role seeks to apply a series of principles including "the best interests of the child", which is fundamental. Acting on the "best interests of the child" means, first, recognizing their particular and specific characteristics, identities, potentials and requirements throughout this stage of development. From a psychosocial perspective, this also means recognizing that children are subject to different social expectations, whether they are a baby (infant) or a young child. The child's best interests require the promotion of their holistic development in line with their characteristics and specific identities.

In the light of the above, the notion of "cycle" in early childhood education arises. There are two lines of argument relating to this notion: the first comes from neuroscience and the second from pedagogy.

When examining early childhood from a neuroscientific angle, there are several key concepts, such as critical periods, windows of opportunity and sensitive periods. These converge and make the first years of life a unique moment of neuronal growth, in which the brain is extremely plastic, therefore creating neuronal networks that will form the basis for further development.

Whether dealing with critical periods, windows of opportunity or sensitive periods, research shows that between the ages of zero and three (first cycle) and then between three and six (second cycle) children are, at certain points, especially sensitive to the experiences their environment offers.

When examining early childhood from a pedagogical perspective, the particularity of learning processes of children, whether in the first or a second cycle, can be observed. This is especially evident when observing the characteristics of the interactions between the child and adults or between children with their peers. *Pedagogy takes up the challenge of addressing and responding to the particularity in interactions* in order to help children organize and re-order their experiences. Some of the characteristics of interactions for learning in each cycle are set out below:

First cycle (zero to three years): building emotional ties and the first social interactions

It is not by chance that the first cycle focuses on establishing relational networks between children and significant adults. These relationships are the basis of the development of social skills at later stages, promoting collaborative (social) learning. This particular type of adult–child interaction provides emotional support, stability and security, encouraging children to explore their environment. This emotional bond provides experiences that are directly related to customs, characteristics and forms of expression typical of the community's culture.

Second cycle (three to six years): Development of skills to exercise citizenship

A democratic culture rests on a series of fundamental lessons. These include valuing freedom (both child's and that of others) and justice. There is also the internalization of a sense of responsibility for actions and decisions; this also covers knowledge of the fundamental rights and obligations that result from being citizens, the willingness to participate in the various areas that affect us (family, neighbourhood, community) and knowledge of the rules and laws governing our lives in society. This is because one of the conditions that characterizes democratic life in society is to understand the requirement of institutions to promote and preserve freedom (individual and collective), in order for them to ensure the common good.

The development of citizenship skills starts very early. It includes skills such as independent and critical thinking, adequate communication, participation in different fields, working with others, decision-making, respecting different opinions and, ultimately, recognizing diversity, and peacefully solving every day conflicts through dialogue.

Basically, in the second cycle of early childhood education (from around three years up to about six or seven years), the emphasis of the curriculum is on experiencing with children the principle of citizenship. This involves having – in teaching practice and in all interactions between children and adults – some relationship models inspired by respect, reciprocity of rights, acceptance of difference and justice, among other things. It involves fair treatment for all based on behavioural rules that make it possible to resolve conflicts and discuss differences and express disagreements.

As Tonucci (2006) points out, the aim is for every individual to be able to say what they think on any given point, knowing that everyone thinks something and seeks to communicate it, and recognizing that it is worth others knowing it.

Differences in curriculum structures, definitions of objectives and learning experiences in early childhood education

Curriculum structure in early childhood education

The structure of the early childhood curriculum may fall into different categories depending on the curriculum concepts that are adopted and the units of analysis selected. The curriculum can therefore be categorized in accordance with degrees of centralization (more or less prescriptive) and the way content is organized (more or less relational).

With regard to early childhood education, the tables below show the different options that may arise based on these two categories of analysis: centralization and organizational focuses.

Table 1: Degrees of centralization of the curriculum structure in early childhood education (more or less prescriptive)

Degree of centralization	General guidelines: foundations and learning objectives	General guidelines: foundations, learning objectives, teaching recommendations	Programmes or manuals with examples

Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of curriculum reviews of six Latin American countries.

Table 2: Focuses for the organization of content (more or less relational)

Focuses for the organization of content	Areas of knowledge or subjects such as language, mathematics, natural sciences and social sciences	Areas of development such as motor skills, social-emotional skills and logical mathematical thinking	Formative areas (learning and development) such as communication, the relationship with the environment and art forms

Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of reviews of online research on curriculum benchmarks of six Latin American countries: Panama, Argentina, Venezuela, Chile, Uruguay and Brazil (websites of the Ministries of Education, April, 2015).

Regarding this information, further debates and exchanges are necessary given that curriculum reference frameworks, as Tedesco *et al.*, (2013, p. 9) state, "are a way to define and give coherence to the curriculum development process".

Defining learning objectives in early childhood education

The selection of learning experiences for the early childhood curriculum is a decision that depends on the options that are chosen for the design of the curriculum model. Thus, each country, in accordance with its design processes, makes decisions regarding the educational intentions that are striven towards, which are based on the conceptions of teaching, learning and the role of educators and educational agents.

As a result, answering the question "What should children learn?" is very complex, given that, despite the similarities among curriculum definitions, the answer depends on the educational intentions that are to be promoted and safeguarded. These decisions are part of a process of social construction, which requires passing through a series of filters in order to ultimately reach agreement. They are validations that are part of public policies and, because of the relevance they have at the national level, they require the participation of various actors for their legitimization.

In this context, it would not be relevant or consistent with the approaches analysed to provide a specific list of subjects (essential or desirable) for early childhood education. It would ultimately be of no practical or theoretical use for public policy.

However, it could provide an examination of curriculum proposals, as an analytical exercise, highlighting the commonalities of different realities.

In this regard, the structure of the curricula were examined in a sample of six Latin American countries[2], was established in accordance with the traditional development and learning areas that are proposed in the psychology of child development. In some cases, there were more up-to-date versions in which the structure was articulated around other, more pedagogical aspects.

It was possible in this examination to ascertain relevant elements to see the formative perspective that informs early childhood education in several Latin American countries:

- An updated view on childhood was observed; this is based on the assumption that children build, and do not simply reproduce, knowledge. Children are active and ultimately participate in society according to the characteristics of this stage of life and the progressive development of their independence;
- The development of identity on the basis of social interaction and with various references to an intercultural perspective was noted;
- The view of child citizenship is being mainstreamed and, at the same time, the fact that children should and can know and demand their rights is being recognized;
- Almost all the curricula examined included the idea of arts in an integrated manner, covering expression, creativity and the development of aesthetic appreciation;
- In the development of oral and written language, the importance of children producing significant oralities and textualities was emphasized;
- All the curricula contained content that are later taken up in subjects at school. This included the development of the basic science and maths skills (e.g. comparing, measuring, counting, handling numbers and quantities, and recognizing figures and geometric shapes);
- The use of information technologies, the development of research skills and care for the environment were also included.

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[2] Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Panama, Uruguay and Venezuela.

In this brief overview of various relevant aspects of the selected curricula, a renewed view of childhood can be seen. It can be argued that, over the course of about two decades, it has been possible to move towards a social image of the child as a capable, participative and constructive agent, acknowledging the existence of a strong collective identity. In this regard, pedagogy designed to promote learning processes in young children must work with the new image of the child and, ultimately, it must adjust and adapt to the changes that the education of young children in the 21st century entails.

Learning experiences in early childhood education

In early childhood education, learning experiences are viewed as pedagogical interactions based on affection, respect and the validation of others (children and adults). Young children are thus recognized as being capable subjects and active "builders" of their learning.

A learning experience is an opportunity for children to have a shared experience that leads them to discover, learn, create and develop skills and knowledge. They are experiences that seek to challenge young children and therefore are intentionally designed by the teacher to respond to their interests (Bassedas *et al.*, 2005; Coll, 1992).

The basic purpose is formative; this means that from an early age values associated with shaping individuals that can investigate, explore, experiment and hypothesize are strengthened, thereby encouraging creative thought processes.

In a narrow sense, it is possible to speak of "learning experiences" only where these situations are able to effectively provide children with learning opportunities. This first major criterion relates to the effectiveness of pedagogical practices developed in early childhood education. This invites us to consider, on the one hand, the implementation of learning experiences as being structurally linked to the characteristics and needs of children at this stage of development (for example, providing safe and positive environments that promote play and exploration), whereas on the other hand, it is linked to the learning achievements of young children at this stage.

Depending on the concept of "learning opportunity", an experience is assumed to be such in so far as it takes place (is planned and carried out), while safeguarding the principles and conditions for children to experience meaningful learning processes. These are processes based on which new experiences (events, information, concepts, relationships, interactions) are non-arbitrarily and substantively linked to the young child's cognitive structures and in which learning actually leads the child to comprehend and understand.

A set of attributes that learning experiences in early childhood should have is outlined below:

- The main actors in these situations are children; they play a leading role in this process, thinking, feeling and acting to solve problems and rising to the challenges that the learning experience presents;
- It is important to encourage children to engage with concrete and interesting problems. These situations should constitute challenges that correspond to the child's daily life and in which they are encouraged to make their own discoveries;
- The questions with which the teacher seeks to motivate and guide young children should encourage reflection and questioning;[3]
- In a learning experience, the teacher accompanies, guides and orients certain processes. However, their main aim is to mediate learning and create enriching environments and scenarios that are meaningful to young children. It is therefore fundamental to be able to contextualize learning experiences in any setting in a way that they are varied and relevant;

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[3] This is why care must be taken with regard to the way close-ended questions, i.e. questions to which there is only one correct answer, are worded.

- In the context of learning experiences, it is possible to conceive of the teacher's role as a mediator, a permanent observer of the child's skills and abilities, as well as the child's requirements and needs in order to continue learning;

- A learning experience guides processes that extend over a period of time, and systematically deepens and addresses the pedagogical intention (expected learning, learning objective) for which it was designed. This comprehensiveness ensures fluidity between topics when changing from one activity to another without a link between them. In fact, this approach facilitates the continuous and consistent coordination of the whole learning process.

Challenges for curriculum designs for early childhood:

Boosting and enhancing participation: Designing a curriculum requires taking into account the participation of various actors at various stages in order to ensure its legitimacy. For their validation, it is fundamental to establish dialogue strategies and consultation processes that consider differences in order to enhance decision-making. Participative curriculum design takes into account documented validation through the consultation of up-to-date literature, consultation processes with various representative stakeholders of the sector, and empirical experiments or validation in various educational realities. The results of these consultation and validation strategies in actual educational centres need to be reported in the relevant timeframes (Britto and Kagen, 2004; Coll, 1992; Forster, 2007; NAEYC, 2002; UNICEF, 2008;).

Safeguarding curricular and teaching identity: during the design processes, various tensions arise which reveal a marked tendency to reproduce school models. Indeed, the weight of tradition in primary and basic education is a recurrent part of the pressures encountered when designing a curriculum for early childhood education, generating "hyper-schooling" behaviour. This situation requires the inclusion of criteria that safeguard the fundamental aspects characterizing the rationale behind early childhood education curriculum: holistic development, educational aims, principles, organization, objectives and teaching guidelines. Recognizing the diversity of each level of education in terms of its particular features, be they didactic, organizational or symbolic, should be the focus when addressing current challenges in educational policies (Diaz, 2010).

Safeguarding the criteria of flexibility, autonomy and diversity: an important challenge is how to strengthen curriculum decentralization, thereby safeguarding the essential educational intentions that are pursued through a range of offers. The dilemma that arises is how to guarantee educational opportunities that recognize diversity, combining centralized and decentralized components and achieving a proper balance between equity and quality. The challenge is to achieve a proper balance between a centralized and decentralized curriculum.

Adopting a national curriculum model with a clear, open and flexible approach that allows for various degrees of realization is an alternative that already has a history in early childhood education. Lessons will have to be drawn from these experiences in order to continue moving forward and responding to the demands for autonomy and heterogeneity in the curriculum.

Incorporating convergence and recursion criteria in the curriculum: in the context of curriculum development policies, it is fundamental to incorporate explicit components of curriculum convergence in order to link with curriculum changes. Even though curriculum development is rooted in the improvement and renewal of curriculum instruments, such instruments cannot be separated from or exclude what society has built or what is socially recognized. In other words, curriculum content produced based on certain political educational contexts cannot be devalued or ignored. On the contrary, they should be taken as starting point for innovations.

It is worth stating that curriculum materials, in addition to clearly defining their purpose, namely ensuring the pedagogical guarantee and challenging educators, must be highly communicable so that they can be easily understood and used daily. Circularity between various components of the curriculum and recursion in the curriculum are two attributes that need to be brought into play to achieve higher levels of positioning for teachers. The point is not to reproduce or to insist on only establishing curriculum details, but to manage to constructively consolidate and renew pedagogical work in order to move forward with greater clarity in the development of the curriculum for early childhood education (Diaz, 2010).

Generating challenging, achievable and culturally relevant learning objectives, conditions which are necessary for the learning objectives to be adopted and be successful in the classroom: one of the central attributes of curriculum design is the mobilizing effect it has on teaching and learning.

Learning objectives should be sufficiently inclusive so as to ensure that cultural and challenging aspects are also achievable. By taking into account these aspects each objective acquires a potential value in successful learning.

Therefore, regardless of the educational cycle, each learning objective cannot be disassociated from the sociocultural context and even less so from the child's actual capacities.

A learning objective that is not achievable is a source of frustration for teachers and children alike. An objective that does not include social and cultural heritage does not have any meaning. And an objective that does not create challenges slows down the child's ability to develop and limits the possibilities to innovate teaching practices. In the light of this, we are dealing with three types of requirements: objectives must be culturally relevant, challenging and achievable. These requirements may at times seem to be diametrically opposed. However, over time they should converge to a point of equilibrium (Britto and Kagen, 2005/ UNICEF; Díaz, 2010; NAEYC, 2002; Peralta, 2002).

Chapter III

Non-conventional modalities in the provision of early childhood education

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This chapter explores the provision of non-conventional early childhood care and education. It discusses the issues regarding its goals, categories, attributes and the need to standardize quality while preserving its defining features.

Some initial observations on the provision of non-conventional early childhood education.

One of the biggest concerns of states regarding early childhood is currently focused on enabling greater access to an offer that combines both early childhood care (the child's well-being and nutrition) and the provision and implementation of quality educational opportunities.

This is with the aim of compensating, starting from nursery school, the socio-economic inequalities that end up creating an uneven playing field for the development of each child's potential. This is how the design of the holistic provision that places childhood at its centre and, moreover, actively involves families and the general community, is the cornerstone of any policy aimed at the above mentioned objective.

In this sense, it is necessary to ask which particular characteristics of the offer are linked to the cultural and geographical contexts where such an offer is available.

Each state must determine, at the local level, programmes that are adapted to the peculiarities of each community. At the same time, its ability to meet the community's numerous needs comes into play precisely in identifying singularities, in order for them to be addressed appropriately.

This wide diversity marks the rise of "non-conventional" or "non-formal" initiatives. They are different in the sense that they are highly adaptable to the specific cultural, social and economic contexts of each country's urban or rural reality.

However, adapting to contexts does not necessarily guarantee the success of this type of programme. Regardless of its characteristics, the programme must meet minimum quality standards in a cross-cutting manner, which tends to be determined as much by social and educational interests as by other various factors in each country.

In this context, it is important to include a dynamic concept of quality, which depends on factors such as the type of society we want to build, the type of individual we want to raise, the focus on human development and learning, the various teaching traditions or the purposes of education and the views on how to achieve them. This active and contextual nature forces each society to establish, on the basis of its own definitions and aspirations, education quality according to that society's particularities.

Thus, non-conventional modalities should be presented as a response to diversity while trying to ensure that all children have access to initiatives that are of the same quality, regardless of where they live, and that they receive sufficient aid and support for equal access and have proper educational opportunities.

Indeed, any efforts towards achieving an equitable and broad educational offer in terms of access and quality must consider the heterogeneity of proposals. The degree of flexibility and coherence with national policies is part of the tension that each state must resolve when designing and implementing early childhood programmes.

Attempts to favour a range of offers have not only resulted in numerous programme options in different countries, but also to a variety of names and content of such proposals.

A wide range of terms and concepts are used to identify "non-conventional" modalities. These relate to the characteristics associated with their implementation (such as community, indirect, intermediate, alternative or flexible modalities), or conceptualizations established by negation (not in school, non-traditional, non-formal).

According to some experts the latter definitions, which involve a negation of traditional or formal modalities, are not suitable, as they suggest that the programmes have the opposite objective, when the rationale for alternative modalities should be to provide a complementary and more contextualized offer (Peralta, 2000).

These and other characteristics relating to "non-conventional" programmes that have been of great importance to the strategies used in early childhood education in the last 30 years are discussed below. The focus is on Latin American countries that, given their geographical, cultural and budgetary realities, have had to encourage children's early start in the educational process, thus leading to the development of this type of offer.

The criteria that define and guide the design of such modalities and programmes, the strategies and practices relating to their implementation, and the principles and aspects that make up the evaluation framework for these initiatives will be discussed.

Definitions regarding non-conventional modalities

A wide range of institutions and modalities are linked to educational programmes and care for young children, which commonly include those provided by a state department (health, work, social welfare, family or education) and/or by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international cooperation agencies or religious bodies, among others.

In addition, Latin America and the Caribbean have developed a variety of care arrangements for children aged between zero and six, which has led to a wide range of conceptual and methodological definitions. It is therefore necessary to have a common framework that makes it possible to characterize and group modalities, thereby facilitating their comparison and study.

One international classification that can be used to distinguish between early childhood programmes that focus on education and those that focus on care is proposed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In its report "Education at a Glance" (2014), it takes into account indicators relating to:

- The staff responsible for the implementation of the programmes (qualified staff versus non-qualified staff);
- The location where the programmes are carried out (spaces that are especially designed for education); and
- The age of children towards whom such programmes are geared.

The OECD has created a structural definition that makes possible the identification of initiatives classified by UNESCO as ISCED 0[4], but that only provide care services. However, this classification has two limitations:

1. Theoretically: from the child's perspective, there is no distinction in terms of the cognitive processes between learning processes (educational) and social interaction (care). Hence, in its daily form, early childhood education involves only care (Marco, 2014/ECLAC).
2. Practically: it is impossible to separate integrated programmes, precisely those that combine, to various degrees, acts that promote educational processes and care, but that nevertheless enable an initial approach to non-conventionally structured modalities.

A classification that also addresses structural aspects has been developed by Fujimoto (2000a), who, on the basis of a review of early childhood education programmes, makes the following distinctions:

1. Formal or school-based modalities: these refer to modalities that are carried out in an institution especially created (built or adapted) to maximize the educational intention. This requires the direct and permanent role of the educator (i.e. the person who plans, carries out and evaluates the process) and the creation of a specific curriculum.
2. Non-school based modalities: these refer to the modalities that cover all educational processes and forms of self-learning that occur outside educational centres. The most common programmes are dependent on the education, health, welfare, justice, human development and women's sectors. The flexibility of these modalities enables the adaptation of their services to children's characteristics, requirements, interests and priorities, as well as to the geographical, sociocultural and economic conditions and the available resources and their use.
3. Informal methods: these are related to all the educational bodies aimed at raising the awareness of adults and fostering greater understanding and appreciation of childhood.

Along the same lines, UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC) (2010) established two types of basic modalities:

1. *Formal*: classic care models that operate in establishments specialized to that end or in classrooms within primary schools. This type of care is provided by teachers and qualified staff and their activities are consistent with the national curriculum, regulations and guidelines. The type of care that is provided generally covers areas related to basic needs such as nutrition, health and physical care, along with educational activities.
2. *Non-conventional* (non-formal or "not in school"): these are modalities carried out in non-school settings and are more flexible in their organization and operation, in many cases addressing the development of families and the community. These programmes tend to be more varied and do not necessarily conform to a general curriculum pattern. They are run by advocates or volunteers, community agents or families, who have usually completed primary or secondary education. These non-formal modalities are directed especially at vulnerable groups or groups in rural or remote areas.

As can be seen, UNESCO's proposal has grouped Fujimoto's categories "non-school-based" and "informal" into the category "non-conventional". The main distinction between them is linked to implementation.

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[4] The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is part of a set of social and economic classifications of the United Nations, applied worldwide with the aim of collecting, compiling and analysing comparable data at the national level. ISCED 0 refers to educational programmes for children between the age of zero to the start of primary education, and focuses on encouraging the child's cognitive, physical, social and emotional development in addition to serving as an intermediary step for the child to follow ordered instruction in contexts outside of the family setting (UNESCO, 2012).

In line with the above, it is interesting to the review the classification proposed by Peralta (2000), which is developed on the basis of the objectives and aims that are pursued in non-conventional modalities. The author states that the various outcomes of these programmes lead to the high variability of designations and concepts: "we think that depending on the focus of its primary purpose, the use of one concept over another can be explained and/or must be applied, which in turn determines its foundation and main characteristics" (Peralta, 2000, p. 165).

Table 1: Classification by purpose of non-conventional modalities

Category	Definition
Substitutes for the school system	They base their existence on various reasons, which go from the open critical theory and/or practice to the alleged inefficiency of the current system, to operative or economic reasons that would support replacement, namely: - criticisms of the system with marked questioning regarding ideology; - based on operative and/or economic arguments.
Alternatives to formal programmes	They provide a certain equivalence that could at some point mean that they replace formal programmes.
Complementary programmes	They are developed in parallel to the existing system, which provides experiences that enrich them.
Has a purpose in itself	Meet the different needs of various groups of participants for which the classic design was not intended, therefore requiring alternative care to be created without challenging formal programmes.

Source: compiled by the author on the basis of Peralta (2000).

It should be noted that many of the programmes that have been designed and implemented in Latin America pursue goals and purposes that are not exclusively educational, but go beyond, by promoting the social development of the communities within which they operate. This is why they are often part of intersectoral efforts to intervene holistically in inaccessible, vulnerable and excluded sectors in Latin American countries, seeking to make an impact at many levels (family and local levels). Comprehensive care involves providing different types of services, such as infant stimulation, health and nutrition, education for families and caregivers, early childhood education in homes and centres, and legal protection against abuse, exploitation and violence (UNESCO, 2007).

As can be seen, the numerous characteristics make it difficult to find a single answer to the questions: What constitutes a non-conventional modality? What needs does it seek to resolve? This in turn hinders the attempt to define common criteria for the design and assessment of these programmes and modalities.

However, beyond classifying programmes according to their methods of intervention, their location, or their objectives, it is important to build an analytical framework. This could highlight the importance of a set of modalities in early childhood education, which would be created based on the needs and characteristics of certain groups or communities.

Criteria for drawing up non-conventional modalities and programmes

The diverse and inherent nature of the contexts of non-conventional programmes and modalities makes the definition of specific and unambiguous criteria related to their design complex. Bearing this in mind, Young and Fujimoto (2004) identify a number of elements that guide the design of such modalities, based on a number of initiatives in more than 22 countries in Latin America. These are presented below.

Table 2: Objectives and strategies that guide the design of non-conventional programmes

Non-school based programmes are carried out with the close involvement of families and the community. The give-and-take between service providers and its users allows non-school based programmes to identify and meet the special needs that arise.	
Objectives	Strategies
Offering young children equitable access to intellectual stimulation, communication, socialization and basic health care and nutrition to promote healthy physical, mental and social development.	Ensure that the government, municipalities, different relevant sectors of civil society, NGOs and universities work together on programmes for early childhood education.
Strengthening the educational role of the family to stimulate small children's intellectual development.	Provide continuing training for families, children's caregivers, volunteers, communities, educators and other actors.
Encourage families and the community to work together for the education of young children, as well as for other social development programmes.	Organize activities in the programmes for early childhood education in the local community, houses, parks, churches, markets, agricultural areas, hospitals, health centres, community kitchens, and kindergartens.
Generating programmes for early childhood education that are sufficiently flexible to cover each community's specific, cultural and economic needs.	Involve community leaders and other volunteers in adapting programmes for early childhood education to ensure respect for cultural values and customs.
Improving the efficiency of programmes for early childhood education.	Carry out follow-up surveys and evaluations of the programmes for early childhood education and of the performance of caregivers and educators who are implementing them.

Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of Young and Fujimoto (2004).

This table identifies at least four areas: intersectorality, the active participation of family and the community, continuing training and monitoring and evaluation.

These areas can be seen in the recognized experiences in Latin America, such as the Centros Integrales de Desarrollo Infantil (CIDI, Comprehensive Centers for Infant Development) in Bolivia (Salazar, 2000) and the Educate Your Child Programme in Cuba (Siverio, 2000).

Aspects that characterize the design of non-conventional programmes:

- Intersectorality: intersectoral and interinstitutional work enables the coordination of goals and strategies to ensure the continuity of care, optimize resources and integrate key elements of early childhood policies into the agendas of each sector. However, intersectoral and interinstitutional work faces a series of difficulties in practice: in order to move forward, it is necessary for the different sectors to articulate a shared concept, by collaboratively establishing the priorities, objectives and courses of action (UNESCO, 2010).
- The active participation of family and the community: this is decisive given that if the initiative is not adopted by the community in the early stages of design, there are no effective solutions in the subsequent stages of implementation. Community participation enables programmes to incorporate appropriately and contextually the community's cultural aspects, values, child-rearing practices and customs.
- Continuing training: periodic training of the entire network of participants in the implementation of the programmes allows for the establishment of a language, common patterns and specific knowledge regarding comprehensive care and early child development.
- Monitoring and evaluation: continuous assessment of programmes and process evaluations allow for the establishment of plans with better continuity, gathering of information about the achievement of programme objectives and report of the results to the participants and other interested institutions.

It is important to highlight that although the four above mentioned aspects are common to non-conventional modalities, they are not exclusive to them, since they are also a constituent part of programmes for early childhood education in general. Therefore, the difference between modalities is determined by the intensity and relevance that these aspects take on, since this is what will be defined in the objectives and purposes of each individual programme.

Brief observations concerning evaluation

The question regarding the assessment of non-conventional modalities, is related to the policy and legal frameworks of each country on programmes for early childhood education and the definition of quality standards.

The first thing that should therefore be clarified is the meaning of quality in education. When defining quality, a political-ideological dimension and a technical-educational dimension can be identified. The first refers to the role of education in each society and the second relates to aspects of educational management (Marco, 2014/ECLAC).

In comparative terms, UNESCO (2010) notes that the normative instruments (policies, curricula, regulations) of Latin American countries do not usually explicitly contain conceptualizations of quality. However, national efforts have been made in defining quality indicators or standards. These, however, focus on the modalities of formal and structured care rather than non-conventional care. This could be because non-conventional modalities have emerged as remedial and partial responses to certain isolated cases.

The difficulty is to establish common and general frameworks of quality standards for all early childhood education programmes, while at the same time take into account specific needs. In that regard, Fujimoto (2000b) proposes and describes a set of basic quality criteria for non-conventional modalities; these are presented below.

Table 3: Basic quality criteria of various alternative modalities for comprehensive early childhood care.

Criterion	Description
Activity	All educational work should be active, dynamic and centred around the child, their interests, needs, potential and problems. Activity is understood as promoting the key role of the child in their learning process.
Comprehensiveness	Emotional, physical, health, nutrition and intellectual dimensions interact to create a whole and must be borne in mind in child care. Comprehensiveness takes into account the holistic development of all dimensions of the child.
Participation	The child, family and community must participate in pedagogical activities, contributing and participating in the decisions on and adjustments to the programmes or services, in order to foster values such as solidarity, cooperation and communication. The family is the natural agent active in any programme for early childhood education.
Cultural relevance	In addition to a meaningful education, which is suited to the child and their context based on their culture, values and traditions, the curriculum must be varied, relevant and pertinent. It is aimed at improving quality of life through education that is useful, highlighting the most meaningful and relevant learning for both the child and their surrounding society and culture. The selection of contents, programming and educational action within intercultural education, with duly trained staff and diversified educational materials tailored to the needs of children and their communities.
Flexibility	Any institution that provides services and staff that participates must be flexible and respect sociocultural characteristics in order to respond with various alternative care modalities that can be readjusted during the process. Flexibility in terms of time, space and educational environments for each cultural group is important.
Sustainability	Aimed at permanence, continuity and ownership of programmes and services by the family, community and civil society as a whole.

Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of Fujimoto (2000b).

While Fujimoto's proposal is built around non-conventional modalities, the components identified and the proposed indicators that could be drawn from them are relevant for all types of early childhood education programmes. These components, along with the definitions of "quality" of each state, should be aimed at drawing up evaluation instruments that cover all offers of education. This would make any evaluation process more complete and consistent, focusing on both the implementation of programmes and the measurement and evaluation of their results.

Challenges to strengthening non-conventional modalities

Based on the information in this chapter, and by way of conclusion, three challenges regarding non-conventional modalities are discussed below.

1. **Producing comparative research**: there are a few studies and little research in the field of early childhood education on non-conventional modalities. Producing data in relation to these programmes would promote and validate their design and implementation on different scales. Moreover, it would enable the sharing of effective practices that could be developed and encourage initiatives to be set up in other parts of the continent.

2. **Incorporating non-conventional modalities into legal frameworks:** non-conventional modalities must be included in national legal instruments, not only those that are strictly educational (curricula and quality standards), but also those that are of a more structural nature. This situation is mentioned by Peralta (2002), who points out that the advances in education and the curriculum have only minimally filtered through to non-conventional modalities. These must be improved in order to effectively empower the affected communities. The challenge is to harmonize criteria and standards while respecting local diversity and ensuring cultural relevance.

3. A good example is Colombia's recent experience. Colombia, as a pioneer in forms of community child care, noted the inequalities between these centres and other public and private centres. In the context of a policy for early childhood "an analysis of the particular conditions, situations and contexts that affect the lives of children in Colombia was carried out. All the modalities in the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) and the Ministry of National Education (MEN) were analysed, which were using different rationales, concepts, scope and criteria relating to quality. It was therefore considered appropriate to move towards the unification of criteria in the provision of services. In this regard, various observations were made concerning the decisions that needed to be taken to organize the modalities of comprehensive care within the framework of a unified public policy" (Colombia, 2013; Marco, 2014/ECLAC).

4. **Safeguarding quality criteria**: formal and non-conventional programmes should be part of the same national strategy, thus safeguarding high quality standards and assessing their complementarity. In addition to more local measures, these measures will necessarily improve educational opportunities that are made available to children in various contexts and realities.

Chapter IV

Characterization of teachers who work in early childhood education[5]

This chapter addresses the challenges in pre-primary teaching. It covers a number of points of analysis concerning teachers' profiles, their work places and their role, along with a brief analysis of policies on the professionalization and social value of teaching. Finally, a set of recommendations to further strengthen professional development is proposed.[6]

Scope of teachers specialized in early childhood[7]

Teachers at this level of education are predominantly female.

Indeed, this is generally the case in Latin American countries, especially in relation to early childhood and primary education (UNESCO, 2013).

A second characteristic feature is the low social status of the teaching profession and low pay, which is particularly acute in countries where teachers are not professionals or have different degrees of training. Linked to this lower or higher status is the educational level at which they teach (OECD, 2014).

In this regard, the McKinsey report (Barber and Mourshed, 2008) found that the social status of teachers directly affects the quality of children's learning and educational processes. Therefore, an education system in which the teaching profession has low prestige will probably attract, on average, students with relatively low qualifications.

Low pay is part of the unfavourable working conditions, which leads to demotivation, high levels of boredom and often frustration owing to the feeling that the sector is passed over and little appreciated, thereby affecting teachers' career paths.

Moreover, the view still persists that teaching on the first level of education is more about care and protection, which are tasks attributed to women and only require minimal preparation.

In this context, the inclusion of men in this sector is particularly difficult, not only because of cultural barriers but also because of objective barriers, such as low pay and limited opportunities for professional development (Krabel in CIME, 2011).

In the field of initial training, the assumptions regarding the status of teaching in early childhood have a direct impact. The narrow view regarding the role of early childhood educators affects quality, due to low entry requirements for initial training, training programmes that are heterogeneous in quality, institutions lacking accreditation or certification and the absence of regulatory frameworks for the selection of academics, among other significant aspects relating to initial training.

A particular concern is that curricula do not incorporate the essentials in teacher training regarding the future use and application of teaching. This does not mean that it should be uniform, but that fundamental content that is specific to early childhood pedagogy should be safeguarded.

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[5] This section focuses particularly on professional teachers, as information about community agents (non-professionals) is scarce or diffuse. Community agents include mothers, collaborators and supervisors who may or may not have completed basic education as well as assistants with tertiary studies of between a year and a half and two years.

[6] The information available on this subject is scarce and with different levels of analysis. Therefore, for the purposes of this chapter, reference is made to studies, self-reports and widespread assumptions that have been part of the debates.

[7] Teachers specialized in early childhood are understood as teachers who have taken courses at the tertiary level of education.

Regarding the academic requirements to pursue a teacher training course in early childhood education, the literature in this field suggests that other mechanisms for admission onto courses, including aspects linked to the teaching and social vocations, need to be integrated in the process of selecting and attracting candidates.

At the work level, depending on the level of training, teachers can work in a "conventional" establishment, such as a kindergarten, nursery, school or college. In addition, there are other care modalities such as crèches or children's centres and all the non-conventional programmes in which collaborators, with other levels of qualifications, usually work. These include community agents, facilitators and specialists that identify as teaching aides.

With regard to the various work spaces, a problem that needs to be addressed is that teachers with more qualifications are working with three to five-year olds, i.e. with *school aged children*, whereas less qualified staff work with zero to three-year olds. This is the case, despite all the research that shows how fundamental early years are. It is thus possible to see the large gap between the provision of early childhood services and what follows, namely schools and colleges (Marco, 2014/ECLAC; OECD, 2014).

Moreover, teachers with a higher level of education can be managers, programme supervisors, academics, specialist researchers, or public policy-makers. This depends on the level of studies they undertake while they are working as teachers in early childhood education.

Taking this into consideration, it is even more indispensable to design policies that are aimed at the professionalization of teachers who are highly specialized. OECD countries are taking action, especially in relation to initial teacher training for this part of the educational sector (OECD, 2014). This action includes promoting training up to university level. This involves taking into account highly specialized curricula, which include not only aspects related to the acquisition of subject and teaching knowledge but also more practical information: hours spent on site, educational research and pedagogical reflection, as well as developing other skills that contribute to improving good teaching practices and interaction with children, families, peers and the education community as a whole.

Some issues regarding work places and teaching conditions

The variety of early childhood education programmes on offer, as discussed above, ranges from the classic, formal or conventional programmes to those are characterized by the use of distinctive strategies to reach rural local communities.

Educational establishments for early childhood are different from other educational establishments in the school system, because they are smaller, have fewer children, have a different curriculum or because of the type of education provided.

This diversity highlights the necessity in distinguishing the profile, role and training of teachers that work with young children. In addition, it is important to define the way in which the various modalities, the emphasis of institutional projects, the design of regulatory frameworks for such projects and the type of financing are organized and implemented.

Among the alternatives for teaching work are programmes that take place in educational establishments that are built for or adapted to that end, in accordance with established standards. They have professional teachers who take on a significant role in the management and operation of the educational centre. In these spaces, teachers take on a direct and permanent role together with the members of the educational community – the children, families and other significant stakeholders in the educational process – taking on administrative, curricular, pedagogical and assessments tasks.

In this work environment it is worth highlighting that, in relation to their professional profile, teachers take on leadership roles in the classroom, which are not always apparent. As such, they are generally supported by collaborators, assistants or facilitators, unlike primary-school teachers who are generally on their own in the classroom.

These establishments are administratively dependent on a centralized State body, a private body or a public-private body, depending on the administrative and financing policies of each country.

Another alternative for teaching work is a non-conventional programme, which is, depending on its objective, characterized by a range of proposals that set out various strategies for its implementation. These are mainly aimed at families.

In these non-conventional programmes, teachers (professional specialists) tend to guide the design, organization, training, monitoring and evaluation processes. Among their tasks, is the leadership in the training processes for facilitators, families and volunteers, also known as "educational agents".

Given the different work environments, the importance of quality of training and support strategies to strengthen training in key areas is clear.

The results of various studies (OECD, 2014) state that a decisive factor in the development and learning of children is the effect of the quality of the educational process on them and, in particular, the pedagogical interactions and relationships established in the various educational spaces. These spaces take centre stage when it comes to teaching and learning opportunities.

From this perspective, the literature on the topic suggests that at the time of drawing up public policies it is necessary to consider the interactive process between the educator and the child, the type of educational environment that best supports and promotes learning and the pedagogical and working conditions that teachers carry out their role and tasks in.

Based on the above, it is possible to state that not only is it necessary to have crucial knowledge of the subject and teaching, but also that teachers share the purpose and meaning of their work and the role of children in the development of the curriculum.

Closely linked to the subject of professional development opportunities, are the teaching conditions in which the teaching and learning processes take place.

Countries vary significantly with regard to structural performance criteria, such as the technical coefficient (the ratio of adults to children). In Brazil, the ratio of adults to children for the age group zero to two is one adult for eight children. For the age group two to three, it is one adult for 15 children and for the age group four to six it is one adult for 20 children. In Chile, groups have a professional teacher who works together with teachers who have secondary technical-vocational education. Regarding the capacity or the legal limits of group sizes for classrooms, in Spain, Hungary and Ireland, for example, a maximum of 25 to 26 children is allowed for five- to six-year olds, whereas in Chile up to 45 children are allowed per classroom.

Moreover, regarding the number of contract hours of preschool teachers, there are different categories ranging from part time and half days to complete and extended days. The trend is that the organization of educational services is adapted to the work schedules of families and primary schools. In any case, aside from the different types of schedule, the increasing coverage of this first level of education will require robust regulatory frameworks in order to regulate the operation of educational centres.

It should be noted that preschool teachers that work in formal care systems with children aged between zero and three, have working weeks that range from 40 to 45 full hours as is the case in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Peru. They perform various tasks during this time which range from contact hours to lesson planning, working with families and reflection on teaching.

The distribution of teaching and non-teaching hours vary and are not regulated, especially for the age group zero to three, even though work in the classroom, in other words directly working with the children, takes up most of the time. There are few comparative studies on the distribution of activities or tasks that are carried out during the week. A backdrop for the analysis is the average of OECD countries, in which 57 per cent of the time is teaching time and the remaining time is non-teaching time (OECD, 2014).

Scope of professional duties

Educational institutions, regardless of the level of education, are generally designed as spaces to promote an internal change to the organization of society as well as social transformation. In this context, teachers play a special role in contributing and leading educational processes in early childhood education.

As it has been shown so far, teachers are not only designing, implementing and evaluating different educational situations but they are also jointly implementing other pedagogical actions, such as reflective and collaborative work. In other words, their acts are aimed at shaping learning communities (Gairín, 2008).

One of the most representative characteristics of early childhood education is precisely the collaborative work that is carried out with and for the community. This is why teachers, who are willing to discuss and exchange ideas with the various educational actors and exercise the type of leadership in which everyone is working towards the same goal, are necessary.

As a result, it is necessary to further develop a professional culture based on collaboration; one in which there is shared work and there are spaces to exchange professional practices, where individual and collective reflection are valued in order to find solutions to problematic situations through consensus. That is to say, spaces that are adapted to learning, building pedagogical knowledge and sharing the purpose and objectives of teaching children.

Another aspect that should be taken into account when analysing professional performance is that teachers are members of an organization and, as such, they form hierarchical relationships and have legal and labour responsibilities (Gairín, 2008).

In summary, the descriptions above highlight the wide range of tasks that teachers for early childhood education perform, that goes beyond teaching in the classroom.

Individuals who are responsible for leading public policy processes are advised to develop criteria and strategies for updating the profiles of teachers, administrators and other members of the teaching staff. This is related to the role that early childhood is starting to play in the public agenda, the increasing political relevance of teachers in the proposals for educational reform and the reconfiguration of the multiple roles and scenarios involved in professional practice.

The raising and systemization of profiles, in addition to contributing to the design of reference frameworks for professional performance, highlights the challenges that are involved in teaching in the context of learning communities.

Dimensional analysis of policies aimed at the professionalization and social value of teachers

The main source for the analysis of policies aimed at the professionalization and social value of preschool teachers, was among the criteria used in the study on the state of the art and guidelines on teaching policies for the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO/OREALC, 2013).[8]

It is necessary to underline that to promote the development and value of teachers, the state and society as a whole must commit to paying special attention to compliance with each of the planned public policy measures. It is not only a question of designing plans and programmes, establishing legal and regulatory changes or increasing funding, but also of making a real commitment towards each and every teacher, with the understanding that they are among the social actors with the most political responsibility in a country.

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8 A similar study is currently being conducted on teachers in early childhood education.

Aiming to contribute towards the design of policies for preschool teachers, a synthesis of the main recommendations is set out below, based on the literature consulted and the reports of actors in the education sector themselves. The recommendations are organized by topic: initial teacher training, in-service training, teaching career, monitoring and evaluation.

Initial teacher training:

Strengthening initial teacher training is one of the main challenges faced by most countries. It involves a set of concrete initiatives and actions that seek to optimize the selection process of student teachers by developing strategies to attract those with a genuine interest in, potential for and special commitment to education. It also involves trying to bolster institutional capacities. Some fundamental actions that are part of the global trend are mentioned below:

- Encouraging the entry of better candidates for teaching by reviewing the course entry requirements for early childhood education, kindergarten or early-years studies;
- Strengthening the inclusive image of the teaching profession in the sense that it is not only a female profession;
- Creating national benchmarks, rules or criteria for the basic curriculum content that should be included in the training programmes of teachers for early childhood education. These benchmarks should be drawn up with sufficiently wide participation;
- Producing plans or mechanisms to support teaching faculties and institutes in order to improve the quality of the training processes of future professionals in this area;
- Ensuring appropriate regulation and/or accreditation systems for the quality of the training programmes and the candidates accepted so that establishments have properly prepared teachers, educators or educational agents.

Continuing or in-service training:

It is important to highlight that educational studies have shown that teacher training starts when teachers start their teaching studies and continues throughout their teaching career. This emphasizes that learning to be a teacher occurs when reflection on the reasoning behind education and how to teach takes place. It is advisable not to link in-service development with incentives, pay rises and promotions where teaching positions are professional or civil service jobs, as this has a negative, and somewhat perverse, impact on teachers who work in sectors with less social capital (UNESCO, 2013).

Continuing or in-service training programmes may vary in their action, objectives and duration, among other aspects. Efforts should be made for these programmes to be accredited by the state body responsible for certifying and offering them.

In this regard, the following may be considered for continuing training: (i) refresher courses; (ii) peer learning; (iii) specializations; and (iv) undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. All these alternatives can be taught in different ways: on-site, distance (online) or a mix of on-site and distance learning. Because of this, it is the teacher who makes time for the training.

Below are a few recommendations:

- The state should ensure that educators, teachers, administrators and educational agents in general have the right to access relevant, varied and pertinent continuing training for the age groups they are working with;
- Ensure that the continuing training provided really has a positive impact on the development of teaching and educational practices, significantly contributing to what children of this age learn;
- Provide effective mechanisms to regulate the offer of training programmes, which should be accredited and/or certified by the state body responsible for education, thus guaranteeing effective professional development;
- Promote ways of working in networks to include collaborative work strategies.

Professional teaching career:

Bearing in mind that this aspect is now being integrated as an incipient alternative in policies for the development of preschool teachers, some considerations are presented below that could contribute to the first design and implementation steps:

- Design proposals with specific mechanisms for teachers that work in early childhood education;
- Design a clear and articulated remuneration policy that encourages and promotes teaching careers in early childhood education and the work done by teachers at this level;
- Develop valid and accepted systems for evaluating the performance of teachers and professional educators at this level, which take into account the particularities of early childhood teaching and education;
- Have a transparent system for the application of jobs and positions as teachers and head teachers of particularly public educational centres;
- Draw up guidelines on practising and working in the field of teaching and education at this educational level to bolster the debate on the daily work and performance assessment processes that are established for early childhood and preschool professionals.

Monitoring and evaluation of teaching performance:

When analysing the various pedagogical conditions in which educational programmes (both conventional and non-conventional) operate, it is difficult to measure the impact of the quality of the staff in early childhood education.

Nonetheless, there are significant differences in the design and implementation of systems that monitor and evaluate the performance of teachers in different countries that have programmes for early childhood education; these systems correspond to the policy positions established by the state for the purposes of carrying out quality control and measuring processes.

There is consensus regarding the need to evaluate the performance of educators, including those that work in early childhood education. This has gained traction especially because it is a priority to have support and monitoring systems that contribute to the continuous improvement of educational programmes that are implemented at this level, thus taking into account the educational community as a whole, and in particular in-service teachers (OECD, 2014).

Various studies have shown the importance of performance evaluations as a way of fostering quality in education. The evidence collected (Murillo, 2007) shows the variability of performance evaluation systems for teachers, although who the evaluator is, is a determining factor. In some models, the evaluations are carried out by external evaluation bodies, while others may use internal evaluation mechanisms. In this regard, self-assessment is a validated procedure and increasingly common.

An important aspect of each country's evaluation policy is the aim of the evaluation process and the way in which the results will be used. This would ensure that the appropriate evaluation instrument is selected and that the information obtained fosters the design of support structures that contribute significantly to in-service teachers.

Teacher evaluation is a significant challenge in terms of public policy, as it tends to be a complex negotiation process among the various actors involved, but also in terms of the effects it can have on the education system and practices. Murillo (2007) recognizes certain elements that hinder the development of good procedures for teachers' evaluation:

- The high cost of the evaluation processes;
- Evaluations tend to determine teachers' actions;
- Lack of consensus, may cause problems during the evaluation process;
- If the process is not transparent, there may be a lack of credibility; and
- Evaluations require a large number of duly prepared evaluators in order to carry out an efficient process.

Evaluation systems should reflect social consensus and be in line with the state's policy positions.

The instruments used should be created in collaboration with and with the participation of various actors and should correspond to the national context. It is therefore recommended that instruments created for other realities or countries are not used.

In the case of early childhood education, it is important that the instruments and procedures correspond to the particularities of this level of education and are not a copy of the rest of the school system, where teachers' performance is measured based on the evaluations and qualifications of their students.

With regard to defining successful evaluation procedures, specialists state that various actors in the system must participate (preschool teachers, trade union representatives, academics, researchers and policy-makers), in order to ensure the legitimacy and long-term sustainability of the process.

Lastly, this is important for the development and evaluation of policy aspects related to drop-out rates, turnover and retention of teachers, especially those who stand out for their professional performance. Abandoning or leaving the education system is a concerning topic and requires comprehensive measures.

Challenges regarding the development of education policies for early childhood

Some of the challenges in terms of articulating the design and implementing policies for the development of the teaching profession are discussed below. They are initiatives that address various areas of action; in some cases, legal changes are required, in more value-based cases a comprehensive approach is required and in others long-term financing is required for their effective implementation.

Recognizing early childhood teachers by providing equal conditions: by recognizing the age group from zero to about five as the first level of education, teachers in this sector should be recognized as qualified professionals and receive the same conditions with teachers in the rest of the system. There should be no distinction whatsoever regarding social status and pre- and in-service training and they should, therefore, enjoy the same benefits and incentives – be the technical, remunerative or related to working conditions – as teachers in other levels of education.

Providing pre- and in-service teacher training with a high level of specialization and quality for early childhood education: this high level of specialization requires systemic efforts on the part of states. Not only should education policy proposals be created and implemented, but greater national investment is also required regarding the provision of teacher training from the start. Training should be offered at the university level, since it is highly regarded for its comprehensive curriculum content and trains students to a high level on the basis of quality criteria. This enables them to work with these same standards in the educational communities in which they teach.

In addition, it is important to create highly specialized in-service training programmes, with content that focuses on comprehensive training and takes into account the needs of the children with whom teachers work. This enables them to truly aid and contribute to the permanent and steady improvement of educational and pedagogical practices that are promoted in educational communities and establishments, especially in the most disadvantaged sectors (geographically, socio-economically or culturally).

Designing and implementing measures to help attract men and good candidates to early childhood education: improving remuneration, social status and work stability by offering a career with advancement opportunities, would make men not to be more motivated and enthusiastic about going into the teaching profession. The image of the profession as a female one – because this level of education is associated with nurturing and caring which are traditionally seen as female tasks– needs to be shed. Therefore, gender considerations and the trajectory towards inclusive societies must be considered when developing training policies for early childhood teachers.

Improving the quality of training programmes: improving these programmes should include key steps, such as creating common frameworks that guarantee fundamental competencies, thereby safeguarding and encouraging the collaboration of institutions towards the programmes' aims. The challenge is working on benchmarks collaboratively, focusing primarily on the content that we want children to learn.

Creating career paths in which the different stages of preschool teachers' careers are systemic and sustainable: it is important to acknowledge that teachers, regardless of the level of education they teach, need to be recognized for their career paths and teaching experience. It is therefore relevant, in the context of a professional teaching career, to consider factors such as induction programmes in every establishment and the development of programmes, especially for new or beginner teachers; this can be done using the experience and training of more experienced members of the community.

Likewise, early childhood teaching should be a career that offers ongoing professional development, accompanied by the community leaders, recognizing their practical experience and valuing their work. This should be done not only at the individual level but also at the collective level, especially regarding the impact of their work on the educational and learning processes of children.

All of this should be accompanied by incentives or recognition that are reflected in teachers' remuneration, without either being the centre and focus of their work. It would be relevant to consider accreditation systems for teachers' individual performance from a comprehensive perspective. This includes moving to a performance assessment system that takes into account the impact of the teacher's individual management, within collective performance, on the educational development of children. Moreover, it is linked to individual accreditation that reports statistical data and accountability regarding the ability of teachers in specialized pedagogical and subject tests. This is relevant in the teacher's daily work, particularly for teachers who have vast experience and long careers.

Improving working conditions: working with children requires highly specialized professionals and a system that takes account of structural quality issues for the provision of early childhood educational services, such as:

- Infrastructure with essential and conducive spaces for the well-being of staff (meeting rooms, sanitary facilities, space for their belongings, a staff room);
- A technical coefficient established by regulation in order to avoid work overload and to ensure appropriate distribution of roles and tasks for the level of education or the number of children enrolled in the centre;
- The same hourly pay as other teachers in the system;
- Working days with contact hours and non-contact hours averaging, for example, standards of OECD countries (57 per cent contact hours and 43 per cent non-contact hours) in order to carry out administrative tasks related to the implementation of the curriculum, collaborative work as a community, family training programmes, etc. The aim is to avoid this work from taking place during their personal time off;
- Creating conditions to avoid teachers leaving the profession, and especially providing support and accompanying teachers to increase their excitement levels about teaching this level of education.

Promoting collaborative, reflective and research-based teaching in early childhood education with a focus on children as subjects of law and using play-based practices: at this level of education, the work done as an educational and learning community, through the high level of participation of families in the child's educational process, is essential. This is especially important when early childhood education takes place in an establishment specializing in this level of education; however, it is lost in most countries once the child enters the school system. Children aged between zero and six "learn through play", as it is a natural way for them to discover how things are connected and to explore the world. The teacher needs to develop the curriculum using this strategy or a pedagogical resource to an educational end, using information that can be obtained from the child's development and learning. This is possible when there is effective, quality interaction with children, provided there is pedagogical reasoning, effective communication, educational research and, especially, co-building of knowledge.

Promoting the participation of stakeholders in policy-making: policies should be sustainable if stakeholders, especially teachers, have been involved in their creation. Lack of teacher participation usually means that policies tend to be weak and fail. The aim is to build teaching policies through educational communities.

Because of this, round tables and discussions should be held, where national educational policy agreements are drawn up and in which the community and different actors can participate (politicians, teachers, families, children, regional union representatives, etc.). It is important to create spaces for dialogue and collaboration between government representatives and the education sector, usually represented by guilds, professional associations and trade unions. It is also important to encourage debates and carry out awareness-raising and communication campaigns where the community as a whole is informed of the policies developed, since ultimately the children of that community are those who benefit or are affected by the quality of the education.

Chapter V

Intersectoral coordination as a way of comprehensively ensuring the rights of the child

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This chapter presents observations on the conceptual frameworks that support comprehensive care initiatives and on intersectoral work. It also examines the purpose and aims of work in regional networks and considers comprehensive national child protection systems. Lastly, a set of challenges in relation to continuing to give effect to the rights of the child from an inclusive perspective is outlined.

Some initial observations on the commitments to children and on the features of policies and programmes

Based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention), signatory States assume a paradigm shift, moving from a welfare approach towards a rights-based approach. This paradigm shift places children on an equal footing before the law, focusing public policies on autonomy that allows the full exercise of their rights as citizens.

A fair and responsible society that respects individuals sees children as citizens with rights, regardless of their social background. It also understands and addresses the key aspects of life, such as children's growth, development and learning, or their need for care and protection. Moreover, it promotes support with physical, psychological, social and emotional development and participation in social life through spaces where they can contribute to society from their perspective as children.

The rights-based approach in early childhood is necessary for the realization and operationalization of the changes that are promoted by the Convention, whose aim is to create conditions for children to be developed, ensuring their well-being and respecting their dignity.

In this way, States that adhere to the Convention are committed to carry out a progressive implementation process of a rights-based approach in relation to early childhood. This is achieved by creating and implementing public policies and mechanisms aimed at promoting and safeguarding the right to protection, provision and participation.

States are thus challenged to move from discourse to putting into practice ideas and guidelines that allow them to translate this new approach, which is based on values and characteristics specific to childhood, into policies and programmes. At the same time, they need to consider the above mentioned aspects with the aim of ensuring children's well-being.

In this context, taking a rights-based approach obliges states to move forward on key aspects in order to shape public policies that promote the rights of the child, including regulatory and legal frameworks, the role of the family, conceptual frameworks to achieve coherence and coordination, and regional work through networks.

The various sectors in society, both state sectors and civil society, are responsible for providing comprehensive early childhood care. Through a rights-based approach, society as a whole is invited to participate, through various bodies, in the design, management and implementation of policies and programmes aimed at ensuring conditions for the well-being and proper treatment of children.

In this regard, Molina, Torres and Moromizato (2013) hold that, for the design and management of policies and programmes promoting child development, the following principles should be considered from a rights-based perspective:

- **Universality**: any initiative should cover all children without any type of discrimination or exclusion. From the day they are born, they should enjoy equal opportunities and conditions in order to fully exercise their citizenship;
- **Indivisibility:** all rights are equally important; there is no hierarchy and rights cannot be ensured partially or in a piecemeal manner.;
- **Interdependence:** all rights are interrelated. Compliance with one right affects compliance of other rights.

These three principles show that the rights of the child are interdependent, as they are all connected to each other in terms of their existence and implementation. In this sense, rights must be understood to be indivisible; they cannot be separated, ranked or categorized. As such, they are a single entity. No right is more important than another right, since the failure to respect one right would obstruct the child's full development and therefore limit their future possibilities.

By way of illustration, it would not be possible to consider a child a subject of law, where their right to health is respected, but the child is deprived of a family or quality education. The failure to respect the child's right to a family and quality education would compromise their chance for full development. This raises the challenge of enforcing rights from a comprehensive perspective, fostering interdependence and collaboration through a system of networks with common goals.

In this way, the various actions of intersectoral work that are articulated through networks become strategic and indispensable to overcoming the fragmented view that has traditionally been part of policies and programmes for children.

Intersectoral coordination for comprehensive care

While the notion of intersectorality in public policies has been around for several decades, conceptual systemization has been rare, and so have the practical tools used in its operationalization (Bedregal and Torres, 2013).

Intersectorality is part of a strategy that brings together a range of actors (institutions), who work collaboratively on public policy objectives.

Cunill (2012) argues that when various government sectors and institutions refer to intersectorality, the problem is understood from a comprehensive, multicausal perspective, driving the search for a solution and tackling it in a comprehensive manner. From this perspective, the articulation, integration and collaborative relationships between sectors, services, programmes and/or actors are key to the search for solutions to various complex social problems.

Intersectorality, when put into practice at the regional level through work in networks, is a management arrangement that enables for a series of challenges regarding social change to be addressed. This term is used when speaking of a collective action that can be presented as follows:

- **Public-private partnership arrangements**: public sector, commercial sector, private sector that is not trade-related and communities;
- **Knowledge specialisms**: the relationship between various government sectors such as education, health and housing.

A comprehensive approach is therefore possible through intersectorality, by bringing together various institutions and areas of knowledge, which, from their respective specialisms, converge to address the multicausality of complex social problems.

With regard to public policies relating to comprehensive care and development, it is especially meaningful to analyse the visions and commitments that countries have regarding the role of the state, participation, the concept of early childhood, the role of families and civil society. Support strategies and mechanisms are drawn up so they can be implemented through intersectoral and interinstitutional coordination mechanisms.

However, in order for these visions to be truly transformative, they must be viable in agreed conceptual frameworks, which establish the essential positions about the aspects fostered in early childhood. The education laws established by each country are one fundamental framework. The official curriculum benchmarks are another fundamental framework; they define everything from the educational purposes, and their underlying approaches and principles, to the learning objectives of certain cycles.

On a different note, it is relevant to highlight that centralized administrative structures are a complex barrier to overcome when implementing intersectoral strategies focused on the development of regional networks. Indeed, centralized organizational structures, where resources and decisions are concentrated, affect local capacity-building, the development of shared diagnoses, the assessment of organizational and local contributions, the benefits of collaborative work and the wealth of diversity.

Taking into account the concerns expressed above, commitments have been made through international agreements to achieve a proper balance between centralized and decentralized administration with the aim of ensuring coordinated and collaborative work plans (Moscow Framework for Action and Coordination, 2010).

Some observations on working in regional networks

When discussing the concept of networks, specifically the concept of regional networks, it is worth highlighting the coordinated work which generates exchanges and connections. A type of symmetry is created in the connections that favour collaboration and finding solutions based on common objectives.

In this sense, drawing up programmes for early childhood at the regional level allows to respond with greater relevance to the requirements and demands of children and their families. These policies with a local purpose are not only decentralized but also seek to mobilize and involve regional organizations and actors.

Indeed, educational programmes for early childhood demonstrate how actors have mobilized and made additional efforts to establish collaborative and integrated relationships in regional work.

These care and education centres and/or programmes are an example of efforts to formulate local policies from a rights-based perspective, as they incorporate community resources, families and institutions, to respond holistically to children's needs.

Therefore, state institutions and programmes (e.g. health centres and social development programmes) and civil society organizations (e.g. neighbourhoods, community centres and the fire brigade), from an intersectoral network perspective, work collaboratively to contribute to early childhood development and learning through their coordination with the educational community.

The expansion of the coverage of early childhood education requires for the focus and, later, the locations to not only take into account factors relating to demand and regional equity, but also cover all sociocultural factors. The point is not to draw up proposals for early childhood care and education without including the points of view of families, the community and civil society.

The network approach works because it creates substantive and profound social impact, where citizens and civil society participate with a clear role: taking responsibility in relation to the problems identified; defining to that end participatory actions and areas of competence to foster the promotion and protection of children; identifying the causes of the problem, its effects and possible remedial actions; and designing and implementing policies, programmes and actions in a participatory, collaborative, multidimensional and integrated manner.

This complex framework forms a structure that supports and incorporates the interactions between the various actors in the network. The purpose of early childhood policy, therefore, seems to be to strengthen these ties from a rights-based perspective with the aim of promoting and protecting childhood. This is achieved by providing the conditions and opportunities that allow children to be happy and to develop and learn in safe and healthy environments.

A systemic approach to the needs in early childhood can be seen in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (cited in Molina, Cordero and Silva, 2008). This shows the way in which the environment influences children's development and learning. In this regard, three types of factors are recognized that decisively influence childhood:

- Biological factors relating to genetics and state of health;
- Factors relating to living conditions, educational background of the family, and physical and sociocultural environment in which the child is born, grows up, explores and learns; and
- Factors relating to access to services such as education, health, protection systems and various types of community organizations.[9]

This model places the child at the centre of a system that is made up of other subsystems that are continuously and dynamically interacting, including the state through policies and institutions, the family and community with its particular values and customs and the community with its various forms of organization and participation.

Depending on the quality of the interactions within this large system and the way in which factors are articulated and combined in and with various subsystems, the conditions for the child's comprehensive development may be fostered or limited.

The objectives and purposes of working in networks

The purpose and objectives of working in networks should correspond to an overarching goal, which should be stated and shared. When initiatives on early childhood are designed and implemented, the rights of the child are translated into well-being and comprehensive care.

Well-being is a composite word defined as "the set of things necessary to live"[10]. In early childhood education, well-being has a holistic dimension and includes affection, living together, and cognitive and value-based skills; it is linked to the degree of satisfaction with life and happiness. Well-being, in any of its dimensions, is fundamental for the full and healthy development of the child.

Adults must create environments that meet the needs required for the child's full development, thereby enabling the child to grow and develop in a society that respects their rights and promotes good treatment.

In this regard, UNICEF (2012) and the UNDP (2012) have stated a set of minimum conditions necessary for children's healthy and happy growth:

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9 Adapted: Benguigui, Y. and Molina, H. 2004. International Meeting on Child Development.
10 Translation of the definition by the Real Academia Española (RAE) (Royal Spanish Academy).

- Enjoy good health;
- Have their basic physical and material needs met;
- Recognize their abilities, emotions and skills;
- Feel safe, protected and free from threat;
- Have healthy, respectful relationships and interactions with others;
- Experience pleasure and emotions;
- Stimulate their full potential in the context of quality education;
- Have meaningful connections with the most important people in their lives;
- Have their rights and dignity recognized and respected;
- Understand and learn about the world they live in, in accordance to their maturity;
- Enjoy and feel part of the natural world and their environment;
- Grow and develop as people with values, who satisfy their needs as children in order to be a healthy, upright people in the future.

Since the task is large and complex, promoting children's well-being is the responsibility of everyone around them at different levels of social interactions: family, community and state. It is therefore essential that the different actors define the ways in which to ensure the well-being of children at this stage of life, since this determines the actions, programmes and policies that are designed and implemented to achieve the desired goal.

Comprehensive care

The current paradigm considers children in their various dimensions as persons, in line with the rights-based approach; the concept of comprehensive care arises from this. This is understood as a set of coordinated actions that aim to satisfy both the need for protection and the needs relating to development and learning, taking into account the child's characteristics, needs and on-going and changing interests (Peralta and Fujimori, 1998).

The needs that are specific to childhood can be grouped into two large categories:

(a) Basic needs for the preservation of life;
(b) Needs for development and learning.

In line with the argument set out by the authors, the diagram below summarizes the needs that exist in early childhood and the type of care that should be provided, which, taken together, form comprehensive care for children:
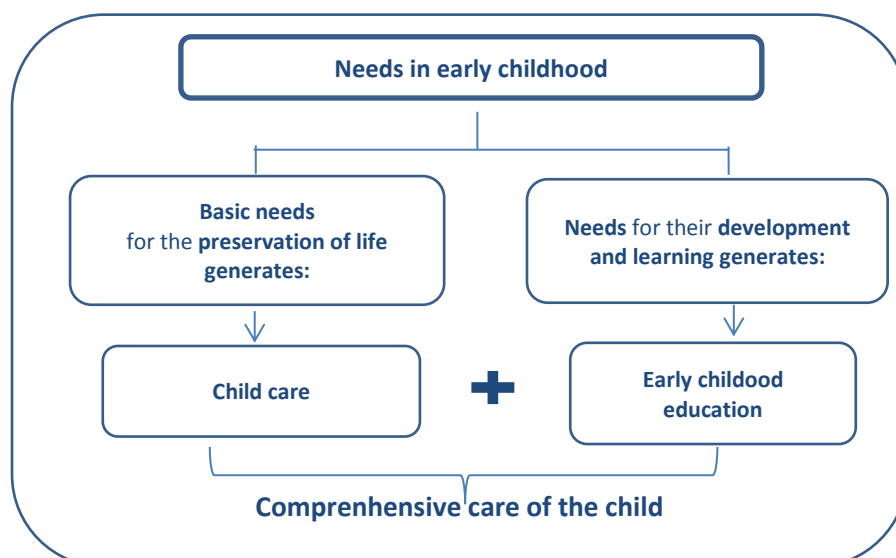
In this context, early childhood care and education arose, a concept which aims to guide the design and implementation of public policies at early childhood (Elvir and Asensio, 2006). Early childhood care and education requires articulating the care aspect with the educational aspect and moving beyond the welfarist concept that has traditionally prevailed in early childhood policies.

In fact, this new perspective has involved an attempt to coordinate different types of action. This would promote the comprehensive development of children, namely child development and learning, health, nutrition, the child's and their family's education and legal protection against all types of abuse or neglect.

Gradually there has been a transition from care to inclusion in education, a key component for the promotion of comprehensive development. Despite its relevance, early childhood care and education is still in the initial stages since, as mentioned earlier, the focus for the zero to three year olds often continues to be on care and protection exclusively. However, for the age group three to six, efforts have been focused on complementing the care aspects by incorporating educational objectives for various educational areas.

Comprehensive national child protection systems

The commitments made by States in respect of the Convention on the Rights of the Child have led to the adoption of legislative measures and national public policies. This gives effect to the rights recognized in the Convention and ensures the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents.

Comprehensive early childhood care, as a response to this challenge, requires an articulated system of state institutions and agencies, in order to meet the multiple, childhood-specific requirements. In this regard, as described in a study by Morlachetti for ECLAC (2013), Latin American and Caribbean states, to a greater or lesser extent, have attempted or intend to establish comprehensive national child protection systems.

These systems seek to promote and protect the rights of the entire universe of the child. Therefore, they must have a clear association and interaction with other (sub) systems, with potential overlapping of programmes and interventions (Morlachetti, 2013).

UNICEF (cited in Morlachetti, 2013) also argues that protection systems include a set of laws, policies and services in all social spheres — especially in the social welfare, educational, health and judicial— that support the prevention of risks related to protection and response.

The Inter-American Children's Institute (cited in Morlachetti, 2013), a comprehensive protection system, is an organizational and operational design conceived for the implementation of public policies on children and adolescents, whose paradigm is the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Based on these overlapping definitions, Morlachetti (2013) conducted a study comparing the establishment of current models of comprehensive national child protection systems in accordance with the commitments made in the framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in four countries in Latin America and the Caribbean: Ecuador, El Salvador, Jamaica and Uruguay.

This study, which thoroughly reviews the legislation and operation of those systems, presents a series of themes and recommendations relevant to the design, drafting, implementation and financing of public policies on the protection and promotion of children's rights.

There are seven relevant points regarding the implementation of comprehensive child care policies with minimum quality standards, for the development of comprehensive national child protection systems: leadership and coordination of the system, decentralization and the role of local governments, federal states, participation, national human rights institutions, evaluation and monitoring mechanisms, and budget.

The table below summarizes the main recommendations for each of the above elements, aimed at strengthening comprehensive national child protection systems across Latin America and the Caribbean:

Theme	Recommendations
Leadership and coordination of the system	Establish a coordination system that is the highest authority in the system for the comprehensive child protection systems for political and technical coordination, by making it a forum for dialogue at the government level.
Decentralization and the role of local governments	Foster and strengthen the implementation of decentralized systems of comprehensive protection by strengthening institutional structures at the local level.
Federal states	Ensure legislative and political harmonization at the federal level to ensure provincial and/or state systems are in line and operate in harmony with the principles and guarantees enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
Participation	Establish advisory bodies on the protection of children and adolescents (such as National Councils) through the coordination and participation of public, private and non-governmental organizations. Civil society organizations should be taken into consideration when drafting the general provisions of national policies on care and monitor their implementation. Set up and/or strengthen legal and institutional structures that promote the participation of children.
National human rights institutions	The national institution for enforcing the human rights of children should be authorized to require information from the various entities comprising the State administration, examine individual complaints and petitions, and carry out the corresponding investigations, either in the case of complaints presented in the name of children and adolescents, or directly by children and adolescents. It should also have the power to provide them with support in recourse to the courts. Encourage national human rights institutions to develop monitoring plans and indicators in relation to the recommendations made in the concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.
Evaluation and monitoring mechanisms	Create and/or strengthen evaluation and monitoring mechanisms to monitor and evaluate meticulously the achievements and results of the protection system. Create and/or strengthen a (sub)system of statistical information on children and adolescents, in order to obtain statistical data that serve as a foundation to draft policies specifically on and adapted to the needs of children of different ages, sex, ethnic origin and place of residence. Consider the creation of an oversight body on children which, in cooperation with civil society, can analyse, evaluate and monitor the functioning, implementation, and efficiency of the comprehensive child protection system. Strengthen systems of human rights indicators, incorporating the perspective of children and adolescents, with the aim of monitoring the most relevant policies on the matter from a rights-based perspective.
Budget	Allocate as many available resources as possible and earmark a determined portion of national and local budgets.

	Adopt budget decisions, taking into account the most disadvantaged groups of children.
	Establish, in the relevant legislation, that the budget for childhood is protected, so that it does not drop below an established minimum, regardless of the ups and downs of the economy and political changes, in order to guarantee the sustainability of the system.
	Establish a system under which national and local authorities are duly held accountable, thereby enabling the participation of communities in planning and supervising the relevant budgets.

Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of the table in Morlachetti (2013).

Challenges in relation to fostering regional networks and comprehensive early childhood care

Achieving inclusive and proactive participation: the greatest challenges and tensions are related to participation. This means moving from discursive and utilitarian participation to inclusive and proactive participation that seriously and responsibly recognizes and takes into account the views on early childhood, moving from a needs-based approach to a rights-based approach.

Creating innovative ways to promote the participation of children and their families is a considerable challenge for policy-making and for the creation and implementation of rights-based programmes for children. Social networks are a cornerstone that actually favours participation. Their impact and scope challenges the incorporation of different types of strategies. These allow citizen participation that facilitates the collection and incorporation of both feelings and proposals regarding childhood problems.

Promote exchange and collaboration: the bodies for the exchange of information and resources are another challenge. States need the support of universities, international organizations and research centres, among others, in order to articulate alliances and agreements that facilitate the provision of technical assistance, mobilize resources, transfer technology and generate various collaborative actions that favour childhood.

In this context of exchange, an important first step is to create Conferences on Early Childhood (such as congresses, assemblies and councils). This idea is based on a public policy experience in Brazil. The aim is to create systematic formal spaces at the local, regional and national levels that contribute to public policy and early childhood education. Its purpose is to bring together different actors of civil society and the state for the co-construction of public policies that protect the quality of education, promoting dialogue and citizen participation. Some features are:

- They are set up and financed by the state;
- They are organized jointly by state bodies and the political and social organizations that are convened;
- They operate within a time frame aligned with the development of policy implementation;
- They bring together and connect various political and social organizations; and
- They are participative processes that bring provisions, suggestions and mandates, among other things.

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