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The right of young children to well-being: a case study of a crèche in Portugal

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ABSTRACT: The monitoring and evaluation of the quality of educational processes and of child and adult learning are key procedures for a praxeological investigation which supports the constitution of an educational context characterised by the right to professional development of all adults who are directly or indirectly involved with the children. These are the principles of Pedagogy-in-Participation, the perspective of the Childhood Association, which is adopted by the Olivais Sul Early Childhood Centre in Lisbon, Portugal. Focusing on six activity rooms of the crèche, this case study aimed to investigate the educational practices with children under three-years-old, drawing attention to factors such as the well-being of the children, the education ideology of the pedagogical approach and the educational environment. The main point of the article is the notion that an explicit pedagogy prompts reflection prior to, during and after the action. Thus, the action is constituted as praxis.

RÉSUMÉ: Le contrôle et l'évaluation de la qualité des processus éducatifs et d'apprentissage des enfants et des adultes sont des sujets essentiels pour une recherche praxéologique qui soutient la création d'un contexte éducatif caractérisé par le droit à la professionnalisation de tous les adultes qui s'occupent directement ou indirectement des enfants. Ce sont les principes de la Pédagogie-en-Participation, la perspective éducative adoptée par l'Association de l'Enfance au Centre d'Education de la Petite Enfance Olivais Sul à Lisbonne, Portugal. Mené dans six salles de la crèche, cette étude de cas vise à enquêter sur les pratiques éducatives avec les enfants de moins de trois ans, attirant l'attention sur des facteurs tels que le bien-être des enfants, l'idéologie éducative de l'approche pédagogique et l'environnement éducatif. Le point principal de cet article est la notion selon laquelle une pédagogie explicite demande réflexion avant, pendant et après l'action. Dès lors, l'action est constituée en tant que praxis.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Monitoring und Evaluation der Qualität von Bildungsprozessen und des Lernens von Kindern und Erwachsenen sind essentiell für eine praxeologische Forschung, die die Entwicklung eines pädagogischen Kontexts unterstützt, der durch das Recht auf berufliche Entwicklung aller Erwachsenen gekennzeichnet ist, die direkt oder indirekt mit Kindern arbeiten. Dies sind die Prinzipien der "Pädagogik der Beteiligung", dem pädagogischen Konzept der portugiesischen *Childhood Association*, das durch die Kleinkindertagesstätten Olivais Sul in Lissabon, Portugal übernommen wurde. In der vorliegenden Fallstudie wird die pädagogische Praxis mit Kindern unter drei Jahren in sechs Räumen der Kindertagesstätte untersucht, wobei die Aufmerksamkeit auf Faktoren wie das Wohlergehen der Kinder, die

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pädagogische Konzeption und das pädagogische Umfeld gerichtet ist. Als wesentliches Ergebnis der Studie wird hervorgehoben, dass eine explizit pädagogische Herangehensweise Reflexion vor, während und nach den pädagogischen Angeboten erfordert. Somit konstituiert sich das Handeln als Praxis.

RESUMEN: Seguir y evaluar la calidad de los procesos educativos y del aprendizaje, tanto de niños como de adultos, es esencial para un estudio praxeológico que conduzca a la constitución de un contexto educativo caracterizado por el derecho al desarrollo profesional de los adultos, directa o indirectamente involucrados con los niños. Estos son los principios de la Pedagogía-en-Participación, es decir, la perspectiva pedagógica de la “Associação Criança” adoptada por el “Centro de Educação Infantil Olivais Sul” en Lisboa, Portugal. El trabajo consistió en estudiar las prácticas educativas desarrolladas con niños de hasta tres años en seis salas de actividades de la guardería, focalizando la atención en el bienestar de los niños, la filosofía educativa del enfoque pedagógico y el ambiente educativo. El punto central del presente artículo respalda la idea de que cualquier modelo pedagógico requiere reflexión antes, durante y después de la acción. Es así como la acción se convierte en praxis.

Keywords: early childhood education; Pedagogy-in-Participation; children’s well-being; adult-child interaction; context-based teacher education

Introduction

This article discusses a report on a study performed during the first half of November 2010, around two months after the beginning of the school year at the Olivais Sul Early Childhood Centre in Lisbon, Portugal. This institution, dedicated to early childhood education, is part of the Aga Khan Foundation Early Childhood Education and Development Programme, and is the result of a partnership between this foundation and the Social Security Institute (ISS), a department of the Portuguese Government. The educational enterprise receives collaboration and support from the Childhood Association, whose responsibilities are to provide investigation, response to, staff development in context, and pedagogical supervision of the development of Pedagogy-in-Participation in the Programme (Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho 2008).

This article will go beyond brief characterisation to provide a dense description of the educational context under examination. It will concentrate especially on aspects regarding the pedagogical perspective used for the education of children and the perspective of context-based training for the purpose of developing educators and methods of evaluation used for monitoring child and adult learning, which are vital for a praxeological investigation.

Educational context and its basic presuppositions

The Early Childhood Centre under consideration has six child day-care activity rooms for children from newborns to three-years-old, and four groups of children aged four to six. This research focused especially on the educational work developed in the crèche, which handles children under three-years-old and is divided into six activity rooms, each with an educator¹ and two support assistants.² The total group consists of 68 enrolled children distributed as follows: a group of eight crèche babies (0- to 10-months-old), three groups of children one- to two-years-old (two of the three groups have eight children and one has nine), and two groups each with 15 children aged two and three years.

The perspective of the educational work adopted by the Olivais Sul Early Childhood Centre is that of Pedagogy-in-Participation,³ regarding pedagogical activities and childcare, the education of all directly and indirectly involved with the groups of children, and the investigative processes on the professional and organisational practices (Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho 2008).

Advocacy of a democratic education shaped the Childhood Association's vision from the outset, defining ethical commitment to early childhood education, individual freedom and social justice as one of its primary bases. This is the reason why, throughout its history, the Association sought to develop projects with both private and public educational contexts. Olivais Sul Early Childhood Centre, the object of the present study, is one of these projects. Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho (2008) established that the mission of the Association is to support professional and organisational development, which are intrinsically related.

The Childhood Association is an association of human development professionals created in the early 1990s. The central aims are: development of processes for change and innovation in childhood institutions, and development of quality as equity. The Childhood Association developed a socio-constructivist pedagogical approach – Pedagogy-in-Participation – seeking collaborative development of childhood institutions as democratic spaces encompassing childhood pedagogy, context-based teacher education, parent involvement in their children's learning, professional and organisational development, and research. The Childhood Association supports the development of Pedagogy-in-Participation in several early childhood contexts across Portugal and develops international dialogues among research networks.

The development of Pedagogy-in-Participation is informed by one of the key assumptions at the basis of the present study: that the nature of adult-child interactions forms the core of early childhood pedagogy. The quality of daily practices, sustained in a favourable educational environment, must safeguard the quality of interaction that mediates the child's well-being, involvement and learning (Laevers 1994, 2005).

In Pedagogy-in-Participation, the theoretical precepts of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner are united in the concept of the competent child possessing potential for accomplishment, and whose needs and interests must be respected. Their life experiences in other contexts such as family and community must be valued at the level of interaction with adults and peers, in collaborative practices supported by sensitive adults investing in the increasing breadth and complexity of learning experiences. In order to do so, the educational spaces are conceived as areas of experiential learning and educational time, and are organised in flexible and regular schedules. This is thought to favour adult-child interactions, child-child interactions and child-objects interaction.

Welcoming and stimulating educational environments significantly impact the child's well-being and participation, which are vital to enhancing the child's possibilities for accomplishment and learning, and their experiences with other people and things of the world (Dewey 1967; Pinazza 2007; Oliveira-Formosinho and Araújo 2011).

Based on research on quality developed in a variety of contexts, Pascal and Bertram (1994) concluded that pre-established and rigid definitions of quality must be avoided, as they inhibit diversity and the range of outcomes emerging from different educational contexts. In each context, it is possible to recognise the needs, motivations and beliefs of each child and of the group of children and adults, which are ultimately the basis for an organisation's culture. The authors advocate development of a more flexible

definition of quality which can be capable of encompassing the diversity of responses, and they believe in the search for qualitative descriptions that can capture in detail how quality comes in to play in configuration of educational work. This conviction on quality forms the basis of the Effective Early Learning (EEL) project created and developed by Pascal and Bertram in 1993.

Given its great relevance to collaborative work with institutions and/or professionals, the Childhood Association team adapted the EEL Project (Bertram and Pascal 2004, 2006) to Portugal, to provide a format for evaluation and development of the quality of early childhood education. This format relies on theoretical principles that are compatible with those that the Childhood Association employs in the development of early childhood pedagogy, education of professionals, and investigation methods.

When considered in the scope of Pedagogy-in-Participation (now being implemented at the Olivais Sul Early Childhood Centre), the developing process of quality in early childhood education does not adopt all evaluative procedures established by the EEL project. It still aims, however, at the same principles of quality, and employs observational tools for evaluation and quality development.

In the work proposed for the Olivais Sul Early Childhood Centre, in line with the contextual paradigm of quality evaluation, the process of evaluation and quality development focuses on contextual elements and accomplishments, and is developed in a collaboration of internal actors (children, professionals and parents), eventually supported by external actors (critical friends, people who form the child's general context). This process conceptualises quality as a concept which is constructive, collaborative, dynamic, and is in process of evolution. It is aimed at production of local knowledge of the processes of change that will be useful to the very subjects producing this quality, and also to those who seek dialogue with them.

Accordingly, monitoring and evaluating quality of educational processes is vital to this early childhood centre, which aims to establish itself as a learning community that can regulate educational processes and assess their accomplishments. This learning community is open to dialogue with external investigators, and values triangulation of data of both internal and external investigation, a very useful strategy for praxeological investigation (Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho this issue), of which this study is an example.

The method

The goal of this study is an evaluation of the quality of the educational practices developed in the crèche classrooms of the Olivais Sul Early Childhood Centre, which include the evaluation of the children's well-being. It is analysed from the perspective of an external researcher collaborating in the educational project, and on research and innovation developed in the centre.

This research is of qualitative nature, and is characterised as a case study (Stake 1999; Yin 2005) in the context of a praxeological investigation (Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho this issue) informed by Lewin (1973), Kemmis and Smith (2008) and Elliott (2010). The study closely followed the day-to-day running of the crèche (focusing on the activity rooms for children up to three-years-old) during an eight-hour period (9 a.m. – 5 p.m.)⁴ in 12 days of fieldwork. The scales of children's well-being and involvement and of the adults' engagement (see Laevers 2005; Bertram and Pascal 2004, 2006) were used according to criteria previously established

by the EEL Project (Bertram and Pascal 2006). The following figures were observed concerning well-being and involvement: five crèche children, 14 of the three groups of one- to two-year-olds, and 12 of the two groups of two- to three-year-olds.

Laevers (2005) presented the concept of well-being focusing on the child's emotional well-being, and investigates how educational environment respects the child's basic needs. This author operationalises this concept in an observational tool that provides indicators of satisfaction; inner rest and relaxation; vitality; openness; self-confidence; and being in touch with their own feelings and emotions. These indicators are used for observation, taking into account a Likert scale of five levels.

The observational sessions focused on different moments of the routine of the crèche: the arrival of the children with only the presence of the assistants, the arrival of the children welcomed by both educators and assistants, and supervised and free activities in classrooms and their external environments both inside (e.g. courtyard, balcony, dining room) and outside the crèche (garden and spaces close to the institution such as a pedagogical farm and a local library).

Participant observation was utilised in addition to the application of Laevers scales. The observation sessions were also recorded in fieldwork notes which took into account the total number of children and adults present during school hours.

The deployment of observational instruments and fieldwork notes from participant observation allowed triangulation of data collected during the investigation to be utilised as a criterion of the quality of the research.

Informal conversations carried out with the educators, with the programme director and the internal investigators also provided written field notes that were systematically documented. They also proved very useful for triangulating information to be used to interpret the object of study.

The research was conducted under the following ethical principles: all participants had full knowledge of the purpose of the study and the procedures adopted for data collection and analysis; the study had the consent and cooperation of the teachers who participated in drafting the field investigation plan; the identities of participating adults and children were preserved for protecting participants and safeguarding privacy, and the obtained data was shared and discussed with the nursery team and management.

Empirical research findings

Table 1 shows the data collected, structured according to the scale of children's well-being in the crèche.

The data in Table 1 indicate that levels of well-being reported are quite high in all classes studied, with maximum scores (4–5) prevailing. This has special significance in the case of very young children with short experience in the context of the crèche. This observation led the researcher to seek an understanding of these indices in observation of the crèche's everyday life, in statements of different internal actors (teachers, other professional staff and researchers) and in the documentation of practices.

Some of the central questions when monitoring daily life and learning in the activity rooms through pedagogical documentation in the context of Pedagogy-in-Participation are: what is the child doing?, what is the child feeling?, and what is the child learning? Indeed, the present case study addresses those questions, but centres mainly on what is the child feeling, how is she or he feeling. The high levels of well-being previously reported prompted more questions such as what made this possible? What are the

Table 1. The observation data according to the scale of children's well-being.

Crèche Rooms	Observed Children		Levels of well-being in each session				
			1st Session	2nd Session	3rd Session	4th Session	5th Session
0- to 1-year-old	Boys	A.	4	5	5	5	5
		Mo.	5	4	4	4	4
	Girls	M.	5	5	5	5	5
		Mi.	5	5	5	5	5
		B.	3	5	5	5	5
1- to 2-years-old	Observed Children		1st Session	2nd Session	3rd Session	4th Session	5th Session
	Boys	Ri.	5	5	4	5	5
		An.	5	5	4	4	5
	Girls	Ta.	5	5	5	5	5
		I.	5	5	5	5	5
1- to 2-years-old	Observed Children		1st Session	2nd Session	3rd Session	4th Session	5th Session
	Boys	Sh.	5	5	5	5	5
		N.	5	5	5	5	5
		Fl.	5	5	5	5	5
	Girls	Le.	5	5	5	5	NO
		Bz.	5	5	5	NO	NO
		Fr.	5	5	5	NO	NO

1- to 2-years-old		Observed Children		Levels of well-being in each session				
				1st Session	2nd Session	3rd Session	4th Session	5th Session
Boys	Ro.	5	5	5	5	5		
	Be.	5	5	5	5	NO		
	Gi.	5	5	5	5	NO		
Girls	Ca.	5	5	5	5	5		
2- to 3-years-old		Observed Children		Levels of well-being in each session				
				1st Session	2nd Session	3rd Session	4th Session	5th Session
Boys	Cl.	5	5	5	SU	SU		
	Ri.	5	5	5	SU	SU		
	Di.	5	5	5	SU	SU		
Girls	Mr.	5	5	5	SU	SU		
	Mn.	5	5	5	SU	SU		
	Al.	5	5	5	SU	SU		
2- to 3-years-old		Observed Children		Levels of well-being in each session				
				1st Session	2nd Session	3rd Session	4th Session	5th Session
Boys	L.	5	5	5	SU	SU		
	MI.	5	5	5	SU	SU		
	Br.	5	3	5	SU	SU		
Girls	Fi.	5	5	5	SU	SU		
	Is.	5	3	5	SU	SU		
	Ma.	5	3	5	SU	SU		

Note: NO = Not observed due to the child's absence; SU = Sessions unfinished.

explanations of some of the central pedagogy actors for this? What are the educators' explanations?

In the context of praxeological research, it is very important for the researcher to listen to well-grounded findings, not just to findings deduced from theory, and question them in order to deepen the understanding of the findings (Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho this issue)

As this research was undertaken in a crèche, and therefore involved very young children, the main finding of the study relates to the high levels of well-being observed. The notes taken during fieldwork generally ratify these scores.

Although some children had experienced the crèche for a very brief period, especially the babies in the crèche (one of the girls had been going to the crèche for less than a month), it was observed that:

children started to recognise the dynamics of the work proposed by the educators in each classroom, identifying themselves with the daily reality of the crèche and, in consequence, getting involved in a number of new experiences and investing in individual and collective play and learning. (Notes taken during fieldwork)

These findings give rise to the following questions: what are the factors contributing to this high level of child well-being, even when the child has so little experience in the crèche? An important indicator in this regard is the data found in the notes resulting from fieldwork observation that allow starting the search for understanding.

Indeed, one of the main questions posed by internal investigators of the Olivais Sul Children Centre relates to the main factors involved in the high levels of well-being achieved by the children: *how are they achieved? What processes account for them? What is the importance of the context? Can we, in dialogue with other centres, achieve this important objective of creating well-being for children right from the beginning?*

A possible explanation – the use of an explicit pedagogy

The hypothesis underlying this research is that an explicit pedagogy of thought, action and reflection on the action plays a role in promoting children's physical and emotional well-being and the subsequent confidence and openness of the family when they experience this well-being. Pedagogy-in-Participation defines four central axes for educational intentionality (Oliveira-Formosinho 2009):

- first pedagogical axis – to be and to feel – toward a pedagogy of well-being;
- second pedagogical axis – to belong and to participate – toward a pedagogy of connectedness;
- third pedagogical axis – to explore and to communicate – toward a pedagogy of experiential learning;
- fourth pedagogical axis – to narrate and to create – toward a pedagogy of meaning.

Indeed, this explicit pedagogy not only organises the axes of educational intentionality that value the well-being of each child, their belonging and participation in the family and at the education centre, it also creates strategies to encourage educational teamwork to co-construct these axes of educational intentionality as basic theoretical principles

for daily action. Context-based staff development, in this *tradition*, does not begin with quick-fix strategies, but rather with the co-construction of an educational vision and mission.

Furthermore, pedagogical documentation (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2003; Azevedo 2009) developed on a daily basis aims to indicate whether or not the desired coherence of theory and practice was achieved. In the eventuality that the documentation does not indicate this, the educational team acknowledges the situation and acts accordingly.

The data originated in notes taken during the fieldwork as a result of observation or informal interviews unanimously highlight the role played by the theoretical framework established by this explicit pedagogy – Pedagogy-in-Participation – for facilitating reflection before, during and after action (Schön 1992, 2000). Individual and collective reflections of the group of professionals, supported in the pedagogical documentation recorded in each child's portfolio, show that the documentation is referred to the underlying philosophy.

The total number of educators (six) acknowledged the value and scope of this theoretical framework for the focus on promoting children's well-being. It is of great relevance to understand that the data points in the direction of an educational ideology, and not to mere didactic recipes.

Recent reviews of literature on investigation into early childhood education point out the role of specific pedagogical learning of educators, and not only general pedagogical information (Frede, Barnett, and Nores 2011).

The role of creating a vision and a shared mission (project) is common to professionals and research groups with the concept of a competent child with rights, particularly the right to well-being (which is also a condition for learning), foregrounded by key educational innovation centres in Europe such as Reggio Emilia (Italy), Pen Green Centre (United Kingdom), St Thomas Centre (United Kingdom), and around the world, such as the curricular experience in New Zealand.

Another explanation – the role of the educational environment

The other hypothesis underlying this study is developed around the role of the educational environment (its organisation of spaces, time and pedagogic material) in contributing with educators for creating well-being.

The six educational environments observed are organised, but flexible; that is, they have an educational intentionality planned through organisation into areas of experience, but are sensitive to the daily reactions of the children when they arrive there. The educational team observes the child and adapts the educational environment according to the child's exploration of, and communication with, the environment. Whilst this combination of organisation and adaptation represents a demanding professional task, it remains an indispensable balance for obtaining correct results.

An integral part of the educational environment is organisation of time, which is identified in the research carried out by the Childhood Association regarding the crèche. Time (educational routine) appears as the key condition for promoting development of relational identities, participative belonging and communicative exploration (Oliveira-Formosinho and Araújo 2011).

The observational records gathered in the study demonstrate that children respond positively to educational environments that are previously created and organised for them and with them. This is visible in their manifestation of pleasure:

...smiles, tranquillity and disposition to interact with others and with the activities. They show promptness and energy in making choices and developing actions. They invest in the experiences and succeed in expressing their needs, interests, preferences, abilities and limitations. (Notes taken during fieldwork)

They make questions through gestures and words, and search for answers. They have company in this journey.

The educational environment and child–adult interactions

The configuration of the educational environment shows the type of interaction with the children that is meant to be established. In addition to this, the relational processes observed in the different crèche classrooms can explain the well-being of children whose experience of the daily life of the crèche was very recent.

With regard to the type of child–adult interactions taken place in the crèche, the data was collected with an engagement scale (Laevers 2005; Bertram and Pascal 2004) which measures adult–child interaction at the level of sensitivity to children, autonomy granting and stimulation. The data indicates that, amongst educators, sensitive and stimulating actions that encourage autonomy in their relationships with the children prevail. Together with the data collected with the scale, the field notes corroborate the quality of engagement by educators. Indeed, in terms of figures, the data is located within the higher scores (4 and 5).

Welcoming attitudes at the moment of arrival are particularly important for the introduction of the children to their daily activities:

Physical contact, songs, storytelling, comments, questions to the older children, games involving a child or the whole group were observed to bring the children in the crèche closer together. The occasional manifestation of discomfort, resistance or conflict called for, in general, precise peace-making actions, combining body language that encourages dialogue. (February 12, 2011, Fieldwork Note)

The educator's sensitivity was also visible in the many opportunities in which the child showed interest in particular objects and activities. Valuation of the initiative and promotion of self-confidence were evident, providing the conditions for the concretisation of educational experiences were provided.

For illustrative purposes, the description below narrates an activity in one of the classrooms of children one- to two-years-old. The activity involved the whole group, and consisted of the projection of light from a torch, moving the beam to focus on different areas.

A one year and seven months old boy, N, remained interested in the activity even after it ended. He then approached the educator, pointed at the object that was already placed back on the shelf, and showed that he wanted to continue the experience. The educator responded to his interest, got the torch back, turned it on and started to make movements towards the wall. Other children, who were close to the boy, also engaged in the activity. In commenting on the activity, the educator encouraged the children to talk about the experience involving the beam of light. (February 12, 2011 Fieldwork Note)

It is necessary to have not only a sensitive attitude towards the child's needs and interests, but also to show a propositional attitude that encourages children to broaden their experiences, maintaining safety, pleasure and autonomy in different situations.

Pedagogical mediation by educators was recorded on many situations. For instance, on one occasion at the crèche, the educator and a baby are involved in producing sounds, hitting two plastic objects to the rhythm of a song:

The educator and the child hold similar objects in their hands. The production of sound by the educator provoked a state of excitement in the girl, who unsuccessfully tried to reproduce the sound by using her object. The educator performed the movements again, encouraging the child to make another attempt. Although the baby girl did not achieve the same sound, she tried multiple exploratory movements with the object in an attempt to make them sound like the educator had done. (February 12, 2011, Fieldwork Note)

It was not the success of the child's attempt that was in question, but the evidence of the child's potential to invest in new discoveries, and the professional's willingness to tune in. Intersubjectivity between children and adults is developed, and it sustains action and learning. Mediation by the educator can also be illustrated in another circumstance observed in the classroom with children one- to two-years-old:

A one year and five months old girl had her own initiative to get a box of seashells on the shelf near the desk where the educator was. She got close and, after taking a seashell out of the box, she placed it near her ear. She acted as if she was hearing a sound. The educator welcomed the child's action by making comments and asking questions about the sound. The child responded positively and continued with her experience doing the same thing with other shells. Another child, who observed the interaction, came up and got involved in the same activity. (February 12, 2011, Fieldwork Note)

The above description is an example of the investment in an action that was previously initiated by another child. Due to the educator's propositional posture and strategy of tuning in, not only has a child intensified its involvement with the activity but it also inspired another child to broaden the experiential situation and, thereby, learn from it.

The greater the involvement of the child in the activities that are developed, more the feelings of pleasure, tranquillity and self-confidence are maximised. The educators observed during fieldwork demonstrated to have understood the intrinsic relationship between children's well-being and their very own style and manners of interaction.

Summarising, one can say that the study emphasizes the role of educational philosophy supporting the thinking of teachers before, during and after action, as well as in their organisation of the educational environment and on the regulation of adult-child interactions.

- In the six activity rooms observed, there is great respect for the children's rights and competency.
- In the six activity rooms observed, there is an understanding of the role of well-being as a condition for the children's happiness, and for them to develop a sense of belonging in the early childhood centre.
- In the six activity rooms observed, one can verify the prevailing presence of sensitive and propositional educational practices which encourage the young children to take autonomous actions.
- In the six activity rooms observed, there is an understanding of the value of documenting what the child *expresses*, so that adults may be in tune and responsive.
- In the six activity rooms observed, the role of the theoretical framework established by Pedagogy-in-Participation's explicit pedagogy allows reflection prior to, during, and after the action.

Concluding comments

The results obtained in this evaluative study of the quality of educational practices undergone at the Olivais Sul Early Childhood Centre⁵ show the close relationship between the favourable levels of children's well-being and the educational environment planned for them. This environment is made dynamic by the educator's sensitivity, stimulation and promotion of autonomy in observed interactions between adult and child.

The presence of an explicit pedagogy of thought, action and reflection on the action play a fundamental role in promoting children's welfare. One of the major expressions of this form of pedagogy is revealed in the design of an educational environment (organisation of educational spaces, management of time and pedagogical materials) favourable to creating well-being. The configuration of the environment shows the type of interaction that is intended for children. Moreover, the relational processes observed in different classes explain the high levels of well-being of children with short experience living in the crèche. Both assumptions underlying this research are, therefore, confirmed.

There is evidence that well-being maximises children's involvement in activities, enabling them to broaden their experiences and learning. The practices of the educators embody the pedagogical perspective enabled by the principles of Pedagogy-in-Participation. Amongst those principles is the acknowledgment that the quality of educational practices is made viable by efforts in professional development, which are also linked to organisational development.

During the fieldwork, contact with the managers, supervisors and internal researchers of the Early Childhood Centre programme has shown an understanding that it is not only required for supporting professionals with the development of knowledge of the educational ideology embedded in this participatory pedagogical approach, but it is also for ensuring that the implemented pedagogy is informed by reflexive training and constant research.

Another conclusion drawn from this study with respect to the training of professionals is that there is need for more investment in training designed for assistants, who are also directly involved with educational activities. Providing specific training in early childhood education is, above all, a right of these professionals, but it is also a way to invest in the quality of the educational work that they can develop together with the educators. The intentionality of pedagogic actions shared by the educators and assistants is likely to optimise good practices for a more desirable adult-child relationship.

This study gathers important recommendations for advocating early childhood pedagogy, based on the rights of both children and adults. Children have the right to good quality education which values their well-being and experiences, and which also invests in new learning. Adults, on the other hand, have the rights of professionals directly or indirectly involved in pedagogical practices and the attention they require, as well as the right to training and research in the workplace. This context encourages professional development.

The change proposed is for breaking away from a particular academic model of professional training which gathers knowledge in a homogenous curriculum based on a techno-rational vision (Formosinho and Machado 2007; Formosinho 2009; Ferreira 2009). Such a model also inspires pre-conceived 'packages' of continued training programmes that are alienated from educators (Fullan 2009).

Inviting these professionals to act as researchers of their own work context (Stenhouse 1998; Day 1999) contributes toward showing that the more the knowledge acquired from the practice of the early childhood educator is valued, the more a new logic of training is established; one that is based on praxeological knowledge, as proposed by Pedagogy-in-Participation. The major challenge facing public policies regarding continued training is to promote the development of projects related to early childhood centres, thereby strengthening actions that result from the work environment itself. Workplaces, in this manner, are promoted as ‘professional learning communities’ (Fullan and Hargreaves 2001; Fullan 2009).

Therefore, this study highlights important recommendations for policies that are designed to meet the development of early childhood education professionals, especially of those in the field of continued education.

Notes

1. The educators of the researched Early Childhood Centre are professionals who have obtained a higher education qualification in Early Childhood Education.
2. The assistants do not hold a degree in a subject specifically related to early childhood education. Amongst the 12 assistants who work in the studied crèche there are different levels of prior training and experience in the education of toddlers.
3. Pedagogy-in-Participation is a term coined by João Formosinho and Júlia Oliveira-Formosinho. The term refers to the pedagogical approach of the Childhood Association (‘Associação Criança,’ located in Braga, Portugal).
4. At the Olivais Sul Early Childhood Centre, children start to arrive around 8:30a.m. They are welcomed by the assistants in a common room near the classrooms. Activities with the educators begin at 9:15 a.m. and end around lunch time (12–12:30 p.m.). The children remain in the facilities after lunch until 6:30–7:00 p.m.
5. This article is just a part of the whole study.

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