

Palavras que anunciam as vidas outras: quando diferentes territórios se encontram na educação infantil¹

Words that announce the lives of others: when different backgrounds meet in early childhood education

Palabras que anuncian otras vidas: cuando diferentes territorios se encuentran en la educación infantil

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RESUMO

O artigo aborda a temática dos encontros em contextos educativos voltados a bebês e crianças pequenas, com idades entre 0 e 3 anos, enfatizando os desafios e as possibilidades que emergem com a chegada de crianças migrantes. A pesquisa tem como cenário a cidade de Sesto San Giovanni, na Itália, onde instituições de educação infantil se deparam cotidianamente com a diversidade cultural trazida pelos processos migratórios. O estudo se ancora na escuta sensível às experiências e enunciações de professoras que atuam nesses espaços, buscando compreender como se configuram os sentidos do acolhimento, da docência e das atitudes pedagógicas nesses encontros. As narrativas docentes revelam tensões, deslocamentos e aprendizagens que se materializam na rotina institucional, indicando que a presença das crianças migrantes convoca reposicionamentos éticos e políticos na prática pedagógica. Assim, o artigo propõe refletir sobre como o ato de educar se reinventa diante da alteridade, rompendo com concepções homogêneas de infância e desafiando os modos tradicionais de organização do trabalho educativo. A análise sugere que o acolhimento não se limita a uma recepção física ou afetiva, mas implica em reconhecer o outro em sua singularidade, gerando novos sentidos para o convívio e para o ensinar. Por fim, os encontros descritos pelas professoras indicam que, mesmo em meio a dificuldades

e contradições, é possível construir práticas educativas comprometidas com a escuta, o respeito e a construção coletiva de pertencimento.

Palavras-chave: Educação Infantil; Migrações; Espacialização da vida; Prática pedagógica; Itália.

ABSTRACT

The article addresses the theme of encounters in educational contexts focused on babies and young children, aged between 0 and 3 years-old, emphasizing the challenges and possibilities that emerge with the arrival of migrant children. The research is set in the city of Sesto San Giovanni, in Italy, where early childhood education institutions face, daily, cultural diversity resulted from migration processes. The study is grounded in a sensitive listening to the experiences and statements of teachers working in these settings, aiming to understand how the meanings of welcoming, teaching, and pedagogical attitudes are shaped in these encounters. The teachers' narratives reveal tensions, shifts, and learning processes that materialize in the institutional routine, indicating that the presence of migrant children calls for ethical and political repositioning in pedagogical practice. Thus, the article proposes a reflection on how the act of educating is reinvented in the face of otherness, breaking away from homogeneous conceptions of childhood and challenging traditional ways of organizing educational work. The analysis suggests that welcoming is not limited to a physical or emotional reception, but it involves recognizing the other in their uniqueness, generating new meanings for coexistence and for the act of teaching. Finally, the encounters described by the teachers indicate that, even amid difficulties and contradictions, it is possible to build educational practices committed to listening, respecting, and collectively constructing the feeling of belonging.

Keywords: Childhood Education; Migration; Spatialization of Life; Teaching practice; Italy.

RESUMEN

El artículo aborda la temática de los encuentros en contextos educativos dirigidos a bebés y niños pequeños, de entre 0 y 3 años, enfatizando los desafíos y las posibilidades que surgen con la llegada de niños migrantes. La investigación tiene como escenario la ciudad de Sesto San Giovanni, en Italia, donde las instituciones de educación infantil se enfrentan cotidianamente a la diversidad cultural traída por los procesos migratorios. El estudio se basa en una escucha sensible a las experiencias y enunciaciones de las maestras que actúan en estos espacios, buscando comprender cómo se configuran los sentidos de la acogida, la docencia y las actitudes pedagógicas en estos encuentros. Las narrativas docentes revelan tensiones, desplazamientos y aprendizajes que se materializan en la rutina institucional, indicando que la presencia de niños migrantes convoca a un reposicionamiento ético y político en la práctica pedagógica. Así, el artículo propone reflexionar sobre cómo el acto de educar se reinventa frente a la alteridad, rompiendo con concepciones homogéneas de la infancia y desafiando las formas tradicionales de organización del trabajo educativo.

El análisis sugiere que la acogida no se limita a una recepción física o afectiva, sino que implica reconocer al otro en su singularidad, generando nuevos sentidos para la convivencia y para el acto de enseñar. Por último, los encuentros descritos por las maestras indican que, incluso en medio de dificultades y contradicciones, es posible construir prácticas educativas comprometidas con la escucha, el respeto y la construcción colectiva de pertenencia.

Palabras clave: Educación infantil; Migración; Espacialización de la vida; Práctica pedagógica; Italia.

Introduction

Lively, that end of the year. The General Director of Public Instruction of São Paulo would be present at the closing ceremony of the school year of the “*Grupo Escolar da Consolação*.” The party promised to be beautiful; another had not been organized before that could compare to it. And it held for me a very special significance: I was bidding farewell to the school. [...] Amidst that festive movement, of daily rehearsals and meetings, I concealed beneath a cheerful face an enormous sadness. There would end the share of schooling to which I had been entitled. From then on, I would be another student of the “school that has no holidays,” the school of life. I was not the only one, among the classmates who were finishing the fourth grade with me, not to continue studying. The majority, poor and modest people, would study no more. Many would go to work immediately, others would learn a trade. The parents had already sacrificed enough, allowing them to finish primary school without working to help them during those years. Some would try to obtain one of the few existing vacancies at the “*Escola Normal*” of *Praça da República*, a government school, free of charge, for ‘ginasial’ and pedagogical education, competing, in a very difficult competition, with hundreds of candidates (Gattai, 2009, pp. 185-6).²

The epigraph we have chosen to begin this article refers to the classic work *Anarquistas Graças a Deus* by Zélia Gattai, the author's debut novel, published in 1979, in the Brazil of the then twentieth century. The book presents accounts of the daily life of a family of Italian migrants and the events in the first half of the said century. Daughter of Ernesto Gattai, a declared anarchist, the work is a portrayal of the labor movements experienced in the city of São Paulo, of the conditions that befell the workers' families, and of all the social and spatial networks that constituted these routines.

The choice of this writer's words touches us and, for this reason, was purposely considered for this text as it is an article that seeks to address the inverse movement: the arrival of migrants in Italian territories. Thus, this article aims to reflect upon the

perceptions of teachers who work with babies and children aged 0 to 3 years-old, in the city of Sesto San Giovanni, in Italy, in teaching spaces with migrant babies and children originating from diverse places.

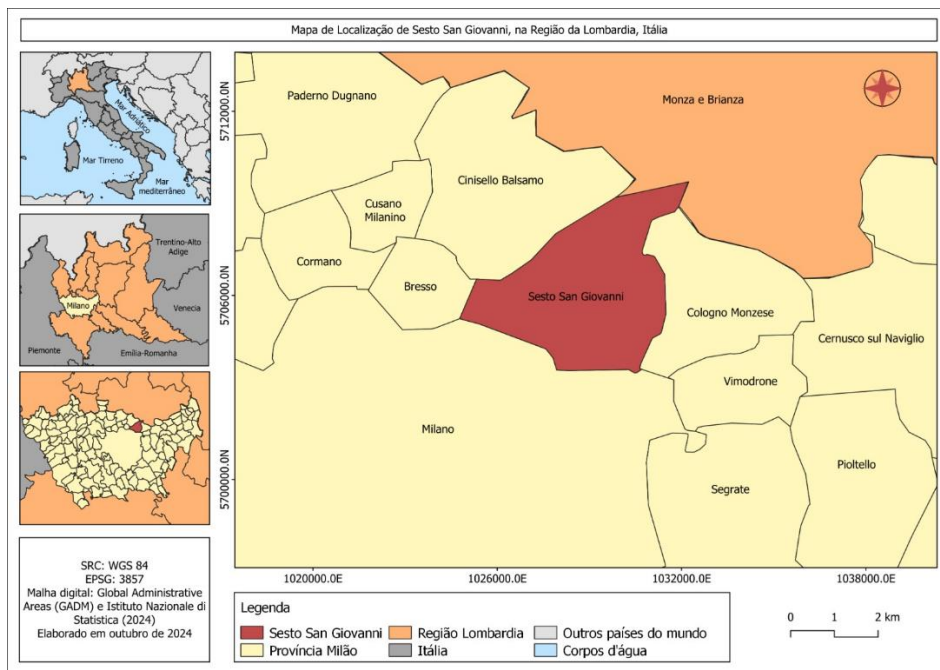
Listening to what early childhood education teachers have to say is one of the important conditions for those who intend to understand teaching practice from the daily routine of pedagogical practice. Those who live and make early childhood education are possessors of precious information and knowledge (Santos, 2024), and this leads us to understand how the encounter promoted in institutional education spaces is experienced, when it comes to placing lives marked by different nationalities at the frontiers.

The existence of any person does not occur outside the social networks that they inhabit and that cohabit with them; we have the adults, we have the territories, we have the routines, the documents, the legislations, and the diverse artifacts that are at the frontiers of this existence (Motta; Lopes, 2021). As Lopes (2021) highlights:

It is not possible to narrate life outside of landscapes, territories, places, and many other expressions that Geography, as a field of knowledge, has taught us; we cannot forget that artifacts make and are made also in this process, and in it are found the many things created in the world, among them, written and inscribed words, materialized in forms of writings (Lopes, 2021, pp. 52).³

This being so, to understand the objective of the research investigation that resulted in this article, it is fundamental to know the city where the interviewed teachers work. These early childhood education professionals develop their pedagogical practice in the city of Sesto San Giovanni, a municipality neighboring the city of Milan, in the Lombardy region, with an estimated population of 78,604 inhabitants.

Map 1 – City of Sesto San Giovanni



Source: Global Administrative Areas and *Istituto Nazionale di Statistica* (2024).

During the 20th century, the city distinguished itself as one of the main industrial hubs of Italy, housing extensive concentrations of metallurgical, electronic, and electrotechnical factories. In this same period, the textile industry, book production, and paper production also prospered.

In the 1970s, Sesto San Giovanni and its industries attracted a growing number of workers from the cities of Brianza and Bergamo and, later, in an increasingly massive way, workers coming from the South (Vecchi, 2023). The city's economic apogee persisted until the crisis of the 1990s, when all the historic factories ceased their activities, the last of them being Falck in 1996. Faced with this scenario, Sesto underwent a significant transformation, evolving from an industrial center to an advanced tertiary center. This transition is still underway, with the reconversion of areas previously occupied by factories.

According to data from the Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, in the group of cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants, Sesto San Giovanni stands out for having the highest percentage of students with non-Italian citizenship, reaching 28.27%.

Following are the municipalities of Prato (26.96%), Cinisello Balsamo (25.88%), and Milan (22.81%).

It is important to highlight that Sesto San Giovanni is situated in the Lombardy Region, located in the north of Italy, being located among the main connection routes between the Mediterranean area and Central Europe. One of the elements that attract many migrants to the region is its economy, characterized by a wide variety of sectors, ranging from agriculture and livestock to heavy and light industry, the economy also being marked by the sector. It is important to highlight that there is considerable sub-regional diversity in the economic activities of companies in Lombardy. The province of Milan—which alone accounts for more than 40% of Lombardy's industrial companies—hosts various multinational and financial companies, health and university institutions, and research centers.

For the realization of the research that formed the basis for the writing of this article, four early childhood education teachers who work with babies and children aged 0 to 3 years-old and practice teaching in the city of Sesto San Giovanni were invited. The research was developed based on semi-structured interviews, allowing space for the elaborations of the teachers' statements regarding the researched theme. The teachers' names were replaced with pseudonyms, in order to preserve the anonymity and integrity of the subjects in accordance with research ethics; the project that underpinned the writing of this article was also approved by the ethics committee of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF)⁴.

Teaching with migrant babies and the challenges of interculturality

A new Italian immigration was arriving in São Paulo. This one, however, was quite different from that other, from the end of the century. Now men and women were fleeing Mussolini's fascist regime, in search of freedom, willing to work and to fight for a more dignified life. Among the new immigrants who appeared at our house, recommended by other anti-fascist friends, was the Covani family, from Lucca: father, mother, and a young daughter. Persecuted by fascism, Cirio Covani had left everything behind, before they arrested him. He was not a man of political activities, had never belonged to any party. He had merely expressed, once, in public, his revulsion at the violence, at the fascist methods: castor oil, arbitrary arrests, etc. Now in São Paulo, he was looking for work. He was an automobile painter. Papa ceded to him the

painting section of his workshop, where he would not lack service (Gattai, 2009, pp. 185).⁵

The intercultural pedagogical approach to issues related to teaching practice with babies represents a particularly challenging paradigm, especially concerning thinking about the pedagogical role of actions developed within childcare centers. This issue mobilizes different discourses, among them: the rupture of the idea of a universal childhood, this being a geographical, sociological, psychological construction, operationalized by the historical context to which it belongs. Childhood is not a universal experience, but rather a construction; thus, expressing individual differences (Santiago, 2020).

[...] childhood is a social construction, a systematized conception in different societies, it presents a dimension that is plural, as it is not possible for me to speak of a single childhood, but of the plurality of societies that cover the terrestrial surface; there exists a plurality of childhoods that are configured (Lopes, 2013, pp. 290).⁶

These differences broaden and are reinforced when cultural differences are present, as in the cases of migrations, when our own finishings (Bakhtin, 2003) are tensioned by the relations of alterity that are established. Human life, by spatializing itself in certain territories, carries with it an infinity of languages that are part of the humanization process of each one of us and places itself at the frontier with all the others. In humanizing geographies are human histories, and in them, the many possibilities of living together and coexisting with others.

Linked to the tensioning of the universalizing ideal of childhood, we must have the perception that interculture is not a given reality nor an automatic process; that is, its construction, in the space of early childhood education, is associated with the promotion of pedagogical practices that ensure that people or groups inhabiting a certain territory can interact among themselves, overcoming mutual distrust, and thus being able to identify forms of coexistence in diversity and make being close an opportunity for mutual enrichment (Silva; Lapov; Prisco, 2023). The construction of practices aimed at the positivization of intercultural relations involves, first of all, the abandonment of a closed and univocal mental approach, but presupposes the

establishment of relations between cultures and the adoption of a model of living with alterity capable of potentiating the positivity of encounter and mutual exchange. For Vygotsky (2006), it is in this encounter that the possibility of transformation is potentiated, of the emergence of neoformations that generate development, not in its linear sense, but in its revolutionary condition, something also defended by Paulo Freire in all his works.

The childcare center in this context is not established as a space as a stage for human beings, but we speak of developing roots, in which relations of reciprocity and alterity are created, because the space of life is not merely a surface where bodies and their locations are allocated, but it is one of the dimensions that forges human peculiarities in their collective geographies; this is a dimension often forgotten in studies in the field of education or only remembered as physical arrangements and organizations. This is one of the principles that the field of Geography of Childhood brings into its debates: space as an important facet of the human condition and, in the case of this field of knowledge, of the condition of being a baby and of being a child, because as Lopes (2024) points out, babies and children are not in space, they *are* the space.

The phenomenon of transnational migrations has amplified the multicultural dimension in the Italian context, reinforcing its intrinsic pluralism and generating new challenges for the pedagogical context. The issue of the diversity and singularity of each baby and child has also become a latent issue in educational institutions that welcome babies, making it necessary to create strategies that enable the construction of educational processes more coherent with the presented reality.

However, the construction of practices that value interculturality is a challenge, especially concerning babies, that is, even if there are discourses correlated to the perception of differences and cultural diversities of the contexts in which they are inserted, there is still an erasure of this diversity in many childcare centers, with two distinct cultural worlds existing: the home, which represents a direct link with the family's country of origin; and the educational institution, which is the symbol of the culture of the host country.

As an example of this process, we were able to observe an interview with the teachers from Sesto San Giovanni, which narrates the first encounters with the migrant legal guardians of the babies after they complete enrollment at the childcare center:

After they complete enrollment, the child's parents meet with us so that we can get to know them [...] this helps at the time of insertion, of adaptation, because in the interview with the family members it is possible to know a little about the context, but it is a moment that is frequently tiring, as it is difficult for us to understand each other, mainly because we speak different languages. This happens because we do not have cultural mediators, so if the family speaks Italian very well, we understand each other; otherwise, we use cell phone translators and we do not understand each other well. What happens after this? Nothing special, because there is no great difference between a foreign child and an Italian child. It is clear that the relationship that the relative may have with the reference adult certainly changes, because coming from another culture they will have a different type of relationship with their mother, for example. However, this is not taken into account in the pedagogical practice of the childcare center (Maria, interview granted in January 2024).

It is possible to notice in the teacher's statement that she recognizes that there may exist a difference in the migrant baby's interactions with their family members; however, she points out that in the professional context she experiences, there is no openness to think about practices that could broaden the perceptions of welcoming and relationship in order to incorporate these new forms of contact established between adults and babies or children. Maria, throughout the interview, also recounts that the experiences with migrant children did not particularly attract her attention:

In particular, I do not recall anything special regarding migrant children, probably because in recent years, no one has impressed me in a particular way; perhaps a mother with a small child many years ago who came from the Philippines cared a great deal and sang a lullaby to her child in her language, and as it was something she cared a great deal about and that helped the child relax considerably, I learned to sing this lullaby to the child, so when she went to sleep, I sang it to her (Maria, interview granted in January 2024).

The teacher does not recognize the intercultural experience lived, but highlights that she sought to know the song the mother sang for the child to sleep; the prominent aspect was to construct a practice that contributes to the moment of sleep, and it was not considered why that action could provide comfort and a welcoming feeling for the child. However, this type of posture is not something uniform; another interviewed teacher reminds us that listening to the family to understand the babies' reality is a

recurrent practice in the childcare center, and that in the cases of migrants, some questions are inserted in these moments of welcoming:

So, when a baby from other cultures arrives, it is a child, what we work with is the child and the family. However, I cannot affirm that we have special attention for the migrant baby because it would be wrong, but we try to understand the family dynamics; how well they speak Italian, what type of relationship they establish with the child, what living conditions they have, we also seek to understand a little of their history. We do this because it allows us, the more we know the history of the child and the family, to build a relationship of trust that makes both the child and the family feel welcomed by us. This, however, is something we generally do with all families; there is no priority of one over the other. Perhaps in the case of the foreign family, we ask a few more questions, even because when we talk about foreign babies, even because I always ask myself: what does a foreign baby mean? That is, what do we understand by a foreign baby? A baby that belongs to another culture, has another color different from mine, what does this mean? How long have the baby's family members been in Italy? (Barbara, interview granted in January 2024).

In the teacher's statement, we can perceive that there is a perceptibility of the importance of knowing the historicity of the baby's family group and their relations with them; however, the same clarity is not seen regarding the importance of knowing the differences in the experiences of a migrant family. The migrant is truly a hybrid being, entangled in contradictory relations. As Sayad (2010, p. 96) highlights:

An emigrant is a man of two places, of two countries, he has to put a little here and a little there [...] his body is here, his head is here – and it cannot be otherwise since his sweat is here – but all the rest, his spirit, his heart, his gaze is there. Spatial experience is always an interspatial experience [in which many conditions of life in society become present] (Sayad, 2010, p. 96, our addition).

Thus, the spatial origin of the subjects announces many possibilities of encounters in their lived experience; babies who are children of migrants, when they arrive at childcare centers, bring demands that differ from those of Italians.

Thus, to immigrate is to immigrate with one's history (immigration itself being an integral part of this history), with one's traditions, one's ways of living, of feeling, of acting, of thinking, with one's language, one's religion, as well as all the other social, political, and mental structures of one's society, the former being nothing more than the incorporation of the latter, in short, with one's culture (Sayad, 2010, p. 22).

Migrant babies arrive at childcare centers with this migratory background; they carry with them a semiotic network that extends far beyond the body that is physically present. The possibility of listening and building a practice that respects this historicity and geographicity is fundamental. As Lopes (2022) reminds us:

Spatial experience is never, in itself, merely a physical experience, composed only of sensory resources, in search of scales to be traversed. No child moves across supposedly metric planes. One always walks within culture and all the constraints that culture forges within us and that we also impose upon the social environment (Lopes, 2022, p. 8).⁷

Seeking to value the experiences of migrant children, Pietra, during her interview, told us that she tries to practice attentive listening in order to build an intercultural pedagogical practice that respects the uniqueness of the babies in her care. The initial conversation with the legal guardians becomes a fruitful encounter for actions to be developed throughout the educational journey:

[...] in the initial interview we have the opportunity to notice simple things, for example, whether or not the family speaks Italian, if there is understanding — ok — but if there isn't, we need to think of alternative ways of explaining, which may include storytelling with gestures or even using simplified language, and this helps me understand how my communication with the baby will be, because I then know whether they have strong familiar contact with the Italian language or not. After that, we ask them to tell us about the first part of the child's life, and from everything we hear, we begin to think about our future welcoming practices. To show the importance of this first moment of getting to know the baby's reality, I'll share an experience I had. This year, for example, we enrolled a child from Senegal. This child spent the first part of their life with their grandmother and aunt in Africa — clearly a context different from that of an Italian childcare center. He then came to Italy with his parents, who brought him over when his grandmother became ill, and so he began to live with his mother and father again after months without seeing them. Let's say that the first stage of his life was entrusted with people who were not his parents, and who then had to readjust and re-bond with the child in a new reality — and all of this happened just a few months before he started attending the childcare center. That was very interesting for us, and we worked collaboratively with the family, which allowed us to understand many cultural aspects, including the way human contact is established. This process began just a few months ago and has been taking shape over time, but it all started with the conversation that took place after the child was enrolled in the childcare center. I'll give some examples just to help us understand: during the first stage of life, this child was cared for by his aunt and grandmother, who were responsible mainly for physical care, including feeding. His diet was different from what we offer at the childcare center, because he's almost two years old and at home was still using a bottle of food mixed into the milk. So, knowing this information prevented us from offering solid foods right after he

joined the childcare center — we instead proceeded gradually, so that both the child and the parents could adapt. This journey has taken on a very interesting form, as I've mentioned before, because each day you see a bit more. The child is now integrated, and I can say I felt good, even though the childcare center is a space very different from what he had experienced until then (Pietra, interview granted in January 2024).

The act of listening regarding the baby's diet, which differs from the way Italian adults typically organize infant feeding, is an important step. It allows distinct cultural practices to be related and seeks a middle path that makes mutual respect between both symbolic systems of feeding possible. This welcoming process has a direct impact on the quality of educational practice. Recognizing the "right to difference"⁸ ensures the expression of the unique culture to which each baby belongs, enriching and diversifying the educational context. As Santos (2024, p. 19) emphasizes, "teaching is an intentional educational action, marked by political, ethical, and aesthetic principles, which are realized in the relationship between subjects, who seek to build knowledge from different fields in an articulated and contextualized way".⁹

In teacher Pietra's testimony, previously cited, we can observe that educational actions related to feeding were not overlooked, but rather broadened in perspective, enabling the possibility of an intercultural practice based on reflection; on flexibility; on choosing to walk toward the new; and on the ability to welcome, to dialogue, to think together, and to be constantly challenged to reflect on pre-established habits.

Intercultural pedagogical practice seeks to construct a process that values cultural belonging, which represents a dimension among various identities, leading us to the discovery of the subject and the mutual recognition of their and our humanity (Bolognesi, 2017). Therefore, any changes that alter the educators' educational style in welcoming immigrant families, or even the organizational structure of the childcare center, are positive and respectful. These changes can be understood as part of an integration process involving both the school and the families in mutual transformation.

Planetary borders, shaped by a history that sliced up space into many official territories (as in the Italian case and the creation of Italy as a nation-state), are fraying under today's social (and natural) forces, leading many people into movement. For this reason, educational boundaries must also be expanded. As humanity moves,

territories move too, because the conditions of these flows generate founding movements within localities, even if surrounded by tensions. The encounter between different facets of humanization always challenges our own human facet. A baby from another geographic space, from another territory, arriving at an early childhood education unit is not “just a baby from another culture”, he or she is a baby who brings tension to my own culture. The universality and singularity present in the ethical-pedagogical dimension that characterizes the intercultural horizon highlight all the diversity that each individual carries.

When we receive babies and children from another culture, listening to their habits and interests, even if only from the person who cared for them during their first year of life, is essential! It allows us to put together the puzzle pieces; with this combination, we can support the child and the families (Luísa, interview granted in January 2024).

Babies and children have the right to respect. They must not only be understood as people, but also be valued in their uniqueness, beyond any uniform or stereotyped ideas. Their presence in the space that welcomes them must take into account the many spatialities that arrive with them, the many landscapes (their forms, smells, aromas, sounds, and tastes), the many inherited knowledge, the legacies that shape humanity. This right embraces and values all individual characteristics, including those linked to geographic origin, economic context, social, racial, cultural belonging, or health conditions.

Barbara, a teacher interviewed, shared how building respect for cultural habits can foster trust between the family and the institution:

Religion is important. So, if the children are Muslim, of course I respect their rules and the children's rules: they must not eat pork, ham, all those things. I have to reassure the family that these things won't be given to their child. That's why the preliminary interview before the child settles in is essential to get to know some aspects of what happens in the family. [...] When the child comes to the childcare center, we know there may be differences, and it's our responsibility. I always say, it's us who must adapt to the situation (Barbara, interview granted in January 2024).

The childcare center is the institution that often introduces migrant children to a culture different from their family's social environment. For this reason, it is of great

importance, but it is also important for the institution itself to be attentive to social needs and diversity, as it is a place where babies are included in society and, therefore, must guarantee multicultural citizenship.

Educational institutions for babies and young children are responsible for the transition from the intimacy of family relationships to broader socialization, involving new experiences and relationships with peers and adults. They must, therefore, be spaces of exchange and participation between teachers and parents who, although they have different roles and experiences, come together in a shared space of well-being and quality of life for the children (Bondioli, 2010). As Crivellari and Pentucci (2023) point out, only through a solid educational alliance among the various agents involved in early childhood education is it possible to establish a foundation for an effective relationship network, especially for those facing particular difficulties.

Interculturality is a pedagogical perspective that implies political action. It is a commitment by our society to ensure that all citizens become part of and help construct bonds of belonging to the space. In this sense, it is important to create conditions from the childcare center onwards so that babies and children can integrate positively into the host society without giving up their cultural roots. The childcare center can, therefore, be a meeting place between family models and different educational practices, providing opportunities for building dialogue, mutual trust, shared guidance, and coherence. It is worth highlighting our understanding of “place” as: affective relationships that people establish with space, becoming a central value in research and in the notion of Topophilia (Lopes, 2013, p. 286). Thus, it becomes necessary to welcome babies by getting to know them, understanding their identity, their history, their cultural roots — in other words, creating spaces of sharing based on family participation.

At this moment, it is important to highlight what we understand by “welcoming”: we start from the idea that it means understanding and being understood, that is, acquiring information and knowledge about the baby’s and the child’s cultural context, as well as providing information about the Italian educational system.

Welcoming comprises several aspects: bureaucratic, organizational, affective-relational, educational-didactic, and cognitive. Another point to keep in mind is that intercultural education is not only intended for migrant babies and children, but for all. Embracing an intercultural perspective means committing to respect with the goal of fostering welcoming habits among Italians, promoting educational practices that value respect and diversity. This process also affects how teachers perceive babies and children, as we can see in the accounts of the interviewed educators:

[...] having families from other cultures at the childcare center is always very interesting because cultures mix, and we draw many aspects, many nuances from them that we might not even realize — simply because we're unfamiliar with some details. But it becomes very interesting when we welcome a migrant baby because it motivates us to do research, read up on the part of the world the family came from, what their methods and habits are, even if just related to simple things like feeding (Pietra, interview granted in January 2024).

The encounter with a foreign child causes unrest, and the act of researching other cultures leads to a rethinking of our own perceptions, especially regarding the migrant family's background. Maria, another teacher, emphasized how her view on differences became more refined after experiencing intercultural reality:

When babies from other cultures arrive at the childcare center, each one brings their own traditions, their own thoughts, their own ways of life. It becomes enriching for me, especially because I want to document them. Before, I didn't know some things, but sometimes it's not even out of ignorance. Sometimes you read, but when you actually have to deal directly with migrant people, the work involves entering — well, maybe not exactly — but sometimes you do, in a way, enter the families' lives, their homes. It's not quite like that, but many of them build very close relationships with us, especially with the mother in some cases, so we share things with each other that you wouldn't just tell anyone, because our role is to care for their children, and that's a powerful thing. The contact with children from another culture made me change how I see all children, especially those in unique situations. Migrant children helped me understand how to positively guide relationships with difference. That's an important point, I think it's a crucial point of professional growth, because it's not just about some children, it's about all of them (Barbara, interview granted in January 2024).

Sensitivity, openness, and the discovery of new cultural and relational dimensions are expressed in the daily work, as we can observe in the statements of the teachers. Thus, working from a perspective that embraces intercultural practice does not benefit only migrant babies and children—it benefits all of them, redefining

our gaze and challenging knowledge previously conceived from a single societal reference point. Luísa, one of the teachers interviewed, highlights how the experience of working with migrant children led her to reflect critically on her own professional practice:

Although I don't see particular differences in such young children, I can say there are certain things that make me reflect on my practice. For example, in the childcare center we offer children cutlery as a way of supporting their autonomy. In the case of Arab children, some are used to eating with their hands, as is the custom in their families, and I find myself wondering whether our practice of offering cutlery is really the right one. That's why I say that working with migrant children made me problematize things, it showed me we need an individualized perspective. I say this because some habits that, for us here in Italy, are associated with autonomy may not have the same meaning elsewhere (Luísa, interview granted in January 2024).

The childcare center can, therefore, be a place where different cultural models meet — and to achieve this, it is essential to learn how to welcome the other, in this case, the family and the baby, by getting to know them, understanding their identity, their history, their cultural roots, and creating spaces for sharing (Raccagni, 2022). Welcoming difference involves the willingness to think about and enable dialogue between different cultures and to build proposals that seek to foster meaningful exchanges among individuals. Pietra shares with us some of the strategies she has developed to promote dialogue between migrant children and the cultural elements of the host country:

For example, I remember a little migrant girl who didn't have the habit of washing her hands at home, it's something that happens, so when we said "Let's eat, we need to wash our hands!", she didn't understand. At one point, I placed a picture near the sink showing what handwashing was, and every time we were about to eat, I would show her the image. This practice became effective because when I showed the image, she would go wash her hands. I translated the words into images. These small things help to create a welcoming environment. Another example is naptime. I have to explain what it means to sleep, because there are children who are not used to falling asleep the way we do at the childcare center. Some are used to falling asleep in their mother's arms; others are used to sleeping in a big bed with their older siblings (Pietra, interview granted in January 2024).

Our arguments, developed in dialogue with the teachers of this territorial space — marked by a history of migrations (of those who left and those who arrived and

continue to arrive) — defend the idea that educational institutions, especially early childhood education units, and in this case, childcare centers, should be true **workshops of humanity**. These are spaces where life, with all its diversity and differences, becomes visible and transformative for everyone involved. This is the core of caring, educating, and transforming.

Early childhood education is inherently intercultural

The voices of the educators interviewed bring to light a central issue in education, particularly in early childhood education. In fact, they remind us that educational services are spaces of community life, where people of different ages, genders, cultures, and social classes coexist. Cultural plurality reinforces and amplifies, within early childhood education contexts, the existence of multiple differences expressed in each person's life story. The underlying issue, therefore, is not so much cultural difference as an abstract given, but rather the processes through which we are capable of educating children within the richness of plurality. What educational practices — open to difference and diversity, which each of our lives expresses — can services and educators put into practice in their relationships with babies and young children?

Respecting children requires that adults decenter their perspective, seeking to understand them through their experiences, taking into account their realities in order to build educational dynamics that are meaningful in the context in which the pedagogy of childhood is constructed. This demands a willingness from adults to adapt, to move, to become comprehensible subjects, but in ways that do not limit their professional practice. Respect cannot be merely a declared principle; it requires commitment and readiness to reflect on what is truly at stake in relationships with children — constructing meaning with values that are both recognizable and recognizing. These values are not automatically established by simply having furniture sized for children, or by including two or three picture books about interculturality in childcare centers or preschools. The educational project of early childhood institutions must be conceived and built to permanently include elements that address both childhood itself and cultural diversity as foundational elements of pedagogical practice, not as occasional events aimed at solving isolated issues (Santiago, 2024, p. 10).¹⁰

Plurality and difference. Childhood is inherently an expression of plurality and difference. If we consider the first months of life, the earliest interpersonal contact between babies and their caregivers, and the initial interactions in daily life contexts, all babies and children, as newcomers, are “foreign” individuals who communicate in deeply unique ways, expressing needs, interests, and capacities that are entirely distinct from those of the adult world. Early childhood education is inherently intercultural by nature, if we consider that its core is centered on relationships and dialogue among human beings — adults, babies, and children who are profoundly different from one another. It is not an exaggeration to say that babies initially experience a condition of estrangement (from Latin *extraneus* — strange, external) in relation to the cultural community that welcomes them and which, at first, is entirely unfamiliar. Babies' bodies, languages, and behaviors constantly express a radical otherness in relation to the adult world, regardless of the specific cultures of reference.

If we take these aspects into account, we can understand early childhood education as developing through the intercultural relationship between adult cultures and children's cultures. This is a complex dialogue, where mutual understanding and adaptation are not guaranteed. While the relationship between adults, babies, and children is certainly asymmetrical, an educational relationship cannot be realized through a directive, unidirectional, or hierarchical approach. Despite their dependence on adults, babies and children actively participate in the interactions that involve them, shaping the course and development of the educational relationship. The horizon of active education brings us to this awareness.

A one-day-old baby, a twelve-month-old, a sixteen-month-old depends entirely on us for survival. However, their radical dependence does not exempt us from establishing an educational relationship with them. What distinguishes an educational relationship from a relationship of training, or worse, from a violent relationship? It is distinguished by the fact that an educational relationship respects and allows the other to be the subject of their own story. I can make proposals, have projects, and offer conditions to my counterpart, whether two days, two years, or twenty years old, but at some point, either the person makes the proposal their own and elaborates on it, or there is no such thing as education (Fresco; Cocever; Ongari, 2023, p. 74).

Let the learners be the subject of their own story. This clear assertion presupposes a vision of identity and culture as ongoing creations, not monolithic constructs, but open-ended processes of continual making and unmaking. In early childhood education, this perspective is constantly called upon in daily practice, in the close contact with the many and diverse worldviews that girls and boys express in their interactions with one another and with adults.

From this perspective, cultural belonging appears to be a fluid dimension among many that animate both individual and collective identities; it is a provisional construction rather than an *a priori* given or a fixed, static trait. Cultures and cultural identities, as Marco Aime (2019) points out, are in constant motion and transformation. In this regard, the following anecdote about a childcare center in Turin, recounted by Aime in *Eccessi di culture* (Excesses of Culture) (2019), is particularly telling:

[...] one day the teachers decided to prepare couscous. They searched for the "original" recipe to prepare it according to tradition. The children were happy. Then one teacher asked a little Moroccan boy:
'Did you like it?'
'Yes.'
'Is this how your mother makes it?'
'My mom's is better because she makes one layer of couscous and one of tortellini, then another layer of couscous...' (Aime, 2019).

Intercultural is not a project, an activity, or a pedagogical path, it intrinsically and inevitably represents the individual and collective experience of each person in infinite transitional syntheses and in unstoppable movement.

From this point of view, the intercultural challenges faced by early childhood education are not about comparing "cultures" as closed, defined worlds within their own borders. Rather, they require more complex and profound educational processes, practices, and relationships, those that occur within educational and school communities. They involve the possibility for each individual, within the communities to which they belong, to have the experience of being and existing in the world with their own body, at the pace and rhythm of their own development, and with the preferences, fears, and impulses they encounter throughout their life story.

The words of some educators are particularly effective in describing this perspective, which does not deny the specific cultural traits of those who come from elsewhere. On the contrary, it suggests that in order to truly accommodate individual, family, and cultural differences, we must prioritize the quality and individualization of relationships with both parents and children. We must create concrete, equitable conditions for shared participation. If every baby or child expresses culture, then it is only through personalized and individualized relationships that hospitality for all — adults, babies, and children — can be realized.

Once again, this is a contribution that early childhood education has achieved thanks to active education, which has brought to light, with great force, the issue of how to recognize active individuals in young children, welcoming the plural expressions each one embodies. Those engaged in early childhood education continue to question and reflect on this matter. The multiplicity of situations within the relationships in the field with young girls continually reintroduces questions centered on the theme of autonomy and dependence, requiring educators to make decisions and concrete choices in order to participate respectfully in their relationships with babies and young children. The goal is to design educational contexts and their daily lives in such a way as to provide each child with concrete and positive opportunities for growth. From this perspective, we understand that each baby or child expresses a world and establishes their unique way of being and acting in the world.

The challenge — as clearly emphasized in the words shared by educators — is thus to implement opportunities for relationships and educational experiences that are plural and differentiated, individualized and egalitarian, enabling each baby or child to engage in active experiences in reality, in the ways and forms that best express their perspective on/in the world. How can we respect and support active girls? How can we make possible the active participation in the social and cultural practices of which all babies and young children are capable?

These are questions that permeate and transform the act of teaching into a teaching attitude, because, as Paulo Freire so aptly reminded us, "there is no teaching without learning" (Freire, 1996, p. 13)¹¹, for:

When we live the authenticity required by the practice of teaching-learning, we engage in a total experience — directive, political, ideological, gnoseological, pedagogical, aesthetic, and ethical — in which beauty must walk hand in hand with decency and serenity (1996, p. 13).¹²

Let us seek encounters hand in hand, bodily encounters that converge in space and time, and that create revolutionary possibilities of rehumanizing ourselves through the constant pedagogical activity and attitude that becomes a pedagogical act.

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Notes

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² Original: “Animado, aquele fim de ano. O Diretor Geral da Instrução Pública, de São Paulo, estaria presente à solenidade de encerramento do ano letivo do “Grupo Escolar da Consolação”. A festa prometia ser uma beleza; não se organizara antes outra que se lhe comparasse. E ela tinha para mim uma significação toda especial: eu me despedia da escola. [...] Em meio àquele movimento festivo, de ensaios e reuniões diárias, eu ocultava sob o rosto alegre uma enorme tristeza. Terminaria aí o quinhão de escola a que tivera direito. Daí por diante seria mais uma aluna da “escola que não tem férias”, da escola da vida. Eu não era a única, entre as colegas que comigo terminavam a quarta série, a não continuar os estudos. A maioria, gente pobre e modesta, não estudaria mais. Muitas iriam trabalhar em seguida, outras aprenderiam um ofício. Os pais já se haviam sacrificado bastante, permitindo que terminassem o curso primário sem trabalhar para ajudá-los durante aqueles anos. Algumas iriam tentar obter uma das poucas vagas existentes na “Escola Normal” da Praça da República, escola do governo, gratuita, para o ensino ginasial e pedagógico, concorrendo, numa competição muito difícil, com centenas de candidatas” (Gattai, 2009, pp. 185-6).

³ Original: “Não é possível narrar a vida fora das paisagens, dos territórios, dos lugares e de muitas outras expressões que a Geografia, enquanto campo de saber, nos ensinou, não podemos esquecer que os artefatos fazem e se fazem também nesse processo e nele se encontram as muitas coisas criadas no mundo, entre elas, as palavras escritas e grafadas, materializadas em formas de escrituras” (Lopes, 2021, pp. 52).

⁴ CAAE: 74422523.1.0000.5147

⁵ Original: “Nova imigração italiana chegava a São Paulo. Essa, no entanto, bastante diferente daquela outra, do fim do século. Agora homens e mulheres fugiam do regime fascista de Mussolini, em busca de liberdade, dispostos a trabalhar e a lutar por uma vida mais digna. Entre os novos imigrantes que apareceram em nossa casa, recomendados por outros amigos antifascistas, estava a família Covani, de Luca: pai, mãe e uma filha mocinha. Perseguido pelo fascismo, Cirio Covani largara tudo, antes que o prendessem. Não era homem de atividades políticas, nunca pertencera a nenhum partido. Apenas externara, certa vez, em público, sua repulsa à violência, aos métodos fascistas: óleo de rícino, prisões arbitrárias etc. Agora em São Paulo, procurava trabalho. Era pintor de automóveis. Papai lhe cedeu a seção de pintura de sua oficina, onde não lhe faltaria serviço” (Gattai, 2009, pp. 185).

⁶ Original: “[...] *infância é uma construção social, uma concepção sistematizada em diferentes sociedades, ela apresenta uma dimensão que é plural, pois não me é possível falar em uma única infância, mas na pluralidade de sociedades que cobrem a superfície terrestre; existe uma pluralidade de infâncias que se configuram*” (Lopes, 2013, pp. 290).

⁷ Original: “*A experiência espacial nunca é, por si só, uma experiência meramente física, de recursos puramente sensoriais, em busca de escalas a serem percorridas. Nenhuma criança desloca-se em planos supostamente métricos. Sempre são feitas caminhadas na cultura e em todos os constrangimentos que essa forja em nós e que nós impetramos no meio social também*” (Lopes, 2022, p. 8).

⁸ Original: “*direito à diferença*”.

⁹ Original: “*docência é uma ação educativa intencional, marcada por princípios políticos, éticos e estéticos, que se concretizam na relação entre sujeitos, que buscam construir, de forma articulada e contextualizada, conhecimentos de diferentes campos*” (Santos, 2024, p. 19).

¹⁰ Original: “*O respeito com as crianças implica aos adultos descentralizar seu olhar, de modo a procurar compreendê-las por meio de suas experiências, considerando suas realidades para construir dinâmicas educativas que sejam relevantes ao contexto em que se constrói a pedagogia da infância. Isso exige disposição dos(as) adultos(as) a adaptar-se, mover-se, tornando um sujeito compreensível, mas de modo a não limitar sua atividade profissional. O respeito não pode ser somente uma declaração de princípios, mas implica empenho e disposição para pensar o que está envolvido no interior das relações com as crianças; construindo significados com valores reconhecíveis e de reconhecimento, os quais também não são estabelecidos de modo automático com a presença de móveis nos tamanhos das crianças, ou com dois ou três livros de literatura infantil que versem a respeito da interculturalidade presente nas creches e pré-escolas. O projeto educativo das instituições de educação infantil deve ser pensado e construído de modo a introduzir, permanentemente, elementos que buscam pensar a condição infantil, bem como a diversidade cultural, sendo um fundamento na prática pedagógica, e não momentos eventuais que expressam a tentativa de solução de alguns problemas*” (Santiago, 2024, p. 10).

¹¹ Original: “*Não há docência sem discência*” (Freire, 1996, p. 13).

¹² Original: “*Quando vivemos a autenticidade exigida pela prática de ensinar-aprender participamos de uma experiência total, diretiva, política, ideológica, gnosiológica, pedagógica, estética e ética, em que a boniteza deve achar-se de mãos dadas com a decência e com a serenidade*” (Freire, 1996, p. 13).