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Autobiographical narratives of novice teachers: Challenges and overcoming in Early Childhood Education

Narrativas autobiográficas de professores iniciantes: desafios e superações na Educação Infantil

Narrativas autobiográficas de profesores principiantes: desafíos y superaciones en la Educación Infantil

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Abstract: This article analyzes the challenges faced by beginner teachers in Early Childhood Education, based on an autobiographical narrative. Drawing on the experiences of one of the authors, it discusses the “reality shock,” the construction of teacher identity, the management of complex classes, and the relationship with families. Grounded in theorists such as Michael Huberman and Carlos Marcelo Garcia, the study highlights the tension between idealized expectations and the practical demands of teaching, emphasizing the importance of initial training, institutional support, ongoing assistance, and collaborative networks to overcome the challenges of professional initiation and promote the continuous construction of teacher identity.

Keywords: Beginning teachers. Early Childhood Education. Autobiographical narrative.

Resumo: Este artigo analisa os desafios enfrentados por professores iniciantes na Educação Infantil, a partir de uma narrativa autobiográfica. Com base nas experiências de uma das autoras, discute-se o “choque de realidade”, a construção da identidade docente, a gestão de turmas complexas e a relação com as famílias. Embasado em teóricos como Michael Huberman e Carlos Marcelo Garcia, o estudo evidencia a tensão entre expectativas idealizadas e as demandas práticas da docência, destacando a importância da formação inicial, do apoio institucional, do suporte contínuo e das redes colaborativas para superar os desafios da iniciação profissional e promover a construção contínua da identidade docente.

Palavras-chave: Professores iniciantes. Educação Infantil. Narrativa autobiográfica.

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Resumen: Este artículo analiza los desafíos enfrentados por profesores novatos en la Educación Infantil, a partir de una narrativa autobiográfica. Basado en las experiencias de una de las autoras, se discute el “choque de realidad”, la construcción de la identidad docente, la gestión de aulas complejas y la relación con las familias. Fundamentado en teóricos como Michael Huberman y Carlos Marcelo García, el estudio evidencia la tensión entre expectativas idealizadas y las demandas prácticas de la docencia, destacando la importancia de la formación inicial, del apoyo institucional, del soporte continuo y de las redes colaborativas para superar los desafíos de la iniciación profesional y promover la construcción continua de la identidad docente.

Palabras clave: Professores principiantes. Educación Infantil. Narrativa autobiográfica.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to reflect on the challenges faced by novice teachers in Early Childhood Education, highlighting issues such as the “reality shock,” the construction of teacher identity, the management of complex classrooms, and the relationship with families. This movement begins with an autobiographical narrative as a starting point for a critical reflection developed by the authors, articulating personal experiences with relevant theoretical frameworks.

The early years of a teaching career are widely studied in the literature and understood as a period of adaptation and overcoming challenges. In Brazil, the initiation to teaching is still marked by difficulties, such as the disconnection between theory and practice in initial training courses and the lack of adequate support in the early years of a career. Studies like those of Huberman (1992) and Garcia (1999) identify this phase as a moment of intense tensions and transformations. As Huberman (1992) highlights, the beginning of teaching is often characterized by a “reality shock,” in which the novice teacher needs to balance their expectations with the concrete demands of daily school life. Garcia (1999) also reinforces that new teachers encounter the differences between the idealized reality during their initial training and the challenges of daily life in Early Childhood Education institutions.

This text is organized into five main parts. Initially, a brief literature review is presented, highlighting the main theoretical contributions that underpin the reflection on the beginning of teaching. The following section addresses the methodology and justifies the choice of the autobiographical approach, emphasizing its relevance for studying teaching experiences. The personal narrative of one of the authors, situated in her early experiences as a preschool teacher, constitutes the central point for the development of critical and theoretical reflection. Subsequently, the narrative is presented interspersed



with reflections grounded in the literature of the field, followed by the concluding remarks, which synthesize the main findings and reflections of the study.

2. BIBLIOGRAPHIC REVIEW

The initial phase of teaching is widely described in the literature as a period marked by significant challenges, according to Huberman (1992) and Garcia (1999). These authors identify the “reality shock” as a crucial moment of adaptation to the concrete demands of the school context, which requires reflectiveness and resilience from teachers. In Early Childhood Education, this experience takes on its own characteristics, considering the specificities of this educational stage and the necessary balance between care and education.

Zabalza Beraza and Zabalza Cerdeiriña (2011) emphasize that the articulation between these dimensions, caring and educating, is fundamental to meet children's needs in a planned and intentional manner, giving teaching practice a broader perspective. In addition, the construction of teacher identity is described as a gradual and non-linear process that involves initial observations, imitations, and later, greater pedagogical autonomy (SEISDEDOS; FERNÁNDEZ; GELABERT, 2018).

Vieira (2019) contributes to this discussion by highlighting that the novice teacher often faces a dilemma between the concrete demands of school practice and the idealized expectations built during initial training. According to the author, this initial confrontation is crucial for understanding the specificities of the school context and for developing a more reflective and autonomous stance.

The relationship between teachers and families is also widely discussed in the literature as one of the pillars of Early Childhood Education. Lima (2021) argues that dialogue between these actors is essential to promote the active participation of families in the educational process, creating an inclusive and collaborative environment. This relationship is described as a crucial factor for both the integral development of children and the quality of pedagogical work.

In addition to the aspects mentioned above, the need for institutional support is a recurring point in studies on teacher initiation. Garcia (1999) and Lima (2021) emphasize that support through continuing education programs and collaborative networks can minimize the impacts of initial challenges and significantly contribute to the retention of teachers in their careers. These studies highlight the importance of structured public policies that promote suitable conditions for professional development.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study has an autobiographical narrative as the main methodological tool for reflecting on and analyzing the experiences lived during the first years of teaching in Early Childhood Education. We understand, based on Delory-Momberger (2011), that the autobiographical narrative is a powerful tool in the field of education research, as it allows for the understanding of individual trajectories, offering a unique perspective on formative processes and the construction of professional identity. Autobiographical narratives allow us to unveil what exists in the subjective testimonies of people, laden with experiences, which are interpreted by the narrator and re-signified in the act of narrating. We can affirm that it is a transformative process mediated by language about the lived experience, through which identity and the relationship with the world are constructed.

The analysis was conducted based on the content analysis method, as guided by Bardin (2011). From a thorough and reflective reading of the autobiographical narrative, thematic categories emerged that organized the discussions: the “reality shock,” the construction of teacher identity, facing complex classes, and relationships with families. These themes were identified inductively, considering the recurrence and relevance of the aspects narrated in dialogue with the theoretical literature.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the autobiographical narrative of a beginner teacher in Early Childhood Education, interspersed with critical reflections grounded in the literature of the field. The narrative and the reflections are organized into four thematic axes: The Reality Shock, which presents memories and reflections on the challenges faced in the early years of teaching; the Construction of Teacher Identity, which addresses the process of forming authentic pedagogical practices aligned with the context of Early Childhood Education; the challenge of “difficult classes” and the need for institutional support, which discusses the importance of institutional support in the face of complex classes; and the Relationships with Families, which discuss the challenges and learnings in building collaborative partnerships between teachers and the children's guardians.

4.1. Shock of reality: Memories and reflections on teacher initiation

I started my journey in Early Childhood Education in 2010, at the age of 22, in a University Unit of Early Childhood Education (*Unidade Universitária de Educação Infantil - UUEI*). The experience of the “reality shock,” described by Huberman (1992) and Garcia (1999), was present in my teaching path. I experienced the moment when the idealized representations of the profession conflict with the concrete demands of everyday school life (HUBERMAN, 1992).

This conflict was manifested in the perception I had at that moment about the activities carried out in the classroom. After four years of study, I asked myself: “Did I spend four years studying to bathe children, clean poop, serve food?” Such tasks, at the time, bothered me because I did not consider them part of a teacher's job. However, over the course of the first year, I began to realize that these activities, contrary to what I imagined, represent fundamental opportunities to promote the holistic development of babies and children.

Care is, in fact, a central element in teaching in Early Childhood Education. However, as pointed out by Zabalza Beraza and Zabalza Cerdeiriña (2011), many teachers, especially beginners, face difficulties in understanding that care activities, such as changing diapers, measuring temperature, and bathing, are part of a broader educational process. For these authors, care goes beyond physical or supportive needs and implies a commitment to the integral development of children, involving affective, cognitive, social, and linguistic dimensions. Thus, by performing such activities, the teacher creates a safe, affectionate, and stimulating environment, essential for the growth and meaningful learning of children.

In addition to the demands related to care, the first year of teaching was characterized by challenges of adaptation and survival, as highlighted by Huberman (1992). Feelings of insecurity and doubt about the ability to work in Early Childhood Education were recurrent. Azevedo, Cardoso, and Nunes (2020) emphasize that insecurity is a striking feature at the beginning of teaching, stating that “feelings of fear and uncertainty in the face of the unknown are common among novice teachers, especially when they have to deal with unprecedented situations in the school context” (p. 5). In a complementary manner, Rodrigues and Cruz (2024) highlight the feeling of unpreparedness when starting to teach babies, noting that “the training experienced by students and graduates in the subjects and during the supervised internship was not able to provide them with the confidence to work with babies and very young children, in fact, not even to start this teaching experience” (p. 9).

To deal with insecurity, I turned to supplementary readings from books and materials from my degree, as well as seeking support from the educational coordination and engaging in dialogue with more experienced colleagues. These strategies were fundamental for my professional development and contributed to overcoming the initial challenges, strengthening my confidence and continuity in the teaching career.

There were, however, moments when I considered abandoning the profession, a common situation among novice teachers. According to Fanfani (2005), many educators express the desire to leave the classroom in their first years of career due to the difficulties faced during this period. Similarly, Garcia (1999, p. 62) characterizes teacher initiation as a decisive moment, marked by intense processes of learning, adaptation, and the construction of professional identity. This period, according to the author, can determine both the retention and abandonment of the profession.

Research on teacher initiation shows that this stage is marked by significant challenges and tensions (LIMA, 2006). Garcia (1999) defines it as a period in which teachers face intense learning processes in complex and unfamiliar contexts. In this scenario, beginning teachers need not only to develop the necessary knowledge for teaching but also to create strategies to balance personal demands and teaching practices. Given this, it is essential that undergraduate programs and continuing education courses address, in depth, the specificities and challenges inherent to the teaching profession in Early Childhood Education.

Overcoming the shock of reality is a starting point, but equally challenging is the process of building a teaching identity.

4.2. Construction of teacher identity

In my first year of teaching, I had the opportunity to work with a teacher whose practice inspired great admiration in me. I observed her closely and, without realizing it, tried to reproduce her actions, such as the way she spoke to the children, her tone of voice, and her intervention strategies at the right moments. This practice of observing and imitating more experienced colleagues is common at the beginning of a teaching career, as argued by Huberman (1992), who points out the influence of peers as one of the first references for novice teachers.

However, I emphasize that the uncritical reproduction of models can limit professional development. It is essential that novice teachers seek to build their own teaching identity, based on their experiences, reflections, and the context in which they



work. According to Seisdedos, Fernández, and Gelabert (2018), the construction of professional identity is a dynamic and multifaceted process, in which the novice teacher needs to critically reflect on their practices and adapt them to institutional demands and the needs of children.

Critical reflection was essential in my journey. I needed to modify actions in favor of the real needs of the children in my class. According to Seisdedos, Fernández, and Gelabert (2018), this adaptation requires flexibility and resilience, as the teacher needs to articulate diverse influences and build practices that engage with their reality and personal style.

Lima (2021) emphasizes the importance of teachers developing a critical and reflective stance towards the models and practices they observe, avoiding uncritical reproduction. Monitoring and support from the pedagogical team are essential during this period, allowing newcomers to build an authentic pedagogical practice that is more suited to the needs of the group.

I understood, then, that the process of building teacher identity involves a gradual transition. At first, my practice was strongly influenced by the experienced teacher, but over time, I began to incorporate other references, aligning them with the institutional context and the needs of the children. This initial phase is characterized by a movement between imitation and autonomy, as Huberman (1992) points out, identifying that the beginning of the teaching career is marked by intensive learning and the search for balance between the observed model and reflective practice.

In this way, I learned to make more autonomous pedagogical choices, developing my own way of planning, executing, and evaluating pedagogical practices. This search for authenticity, according to Seisdedos, Fernández, and Gelabert (2018), is a central element in the development of teaching identity, as it allows the teacher to articulate reflection and practice in a conscious and critical manner.

Although the development of a teaching identity is a central process, it intensifies in challenging contexts, such as managing classes considered difficult.

4.3. The challenge of “difficult classes” and the need for institutional support

In January 2012, when I first took on a classroom “just for me,” I faced an even greater challenge than I had imagined. It was a class that the institution's team avoided, made up of children of different ages and stages of development. The context presented complex demands: babies in the process of adaptation, children at various motor stages -

some were walking, others were not - children who were fully potty training, and recurring conflict situations, such as the “phase of many bites.” In addition, verbal communication was uneven among the children, which required a careful eye and continuous adaptation to the group's reality.

Reflecting on this experience, I found support in the literature that highlights the common practice of assigning classes known as more difficult to beginner teachers. According to Azevedo, Cardoso, and Nunes (2020), the complex demands faced by beginners are often equivalent to those required of more experienced professionals, which can lead to overload and demotivation. Such a scenario reinforces the need for institutional support for these teachers, in order to provide assistance in dealing with challenging situations.

Garcia (1999) highlights that the novice teacher needs effective institutional support, with monitoring that helps them face the typical difficulties of this stage and develop their practice with greater confidence. According to the author, the tensions faced by beginners arise from uncertainties regarding the mastery of content and methods, as well as difficulties in managing relationships with students, colleagues, and families (GARCIA, 1999, p. 70).

During this stage of my journey as an educator in Early Childhood Education, I committed myself to articulating practical experiences, critical reflections, and theoretical knowledge, essential elements for the construction of an authentic pedagogical practice suitable for the specific needs of babies and children. Gradually, I approached more experienced colleagues, fostering dialogues that included joint planning of pedagogical activities. This process proved to be an enriching experience of collaborative exchange, in which the support received was fundamental for my professional development. At the same time, I realized that my participation also stimulated my colleagues' reflection, configuring a cooperative effort that strengthened both my individual performance and the collective practice within the institutional environment.

According to Seisdedos, Fernández, and Gelabert (2018), peer collaboration, based on mutual support and effective communication, plays an essential role in creating positive educational environments. The authors emphasize that social recognition from families and the educational community is equally decisive, as it reinforces the teacher's self-confidence and contributes to their sense of professional belonging. In this context, they advocate for the need for public policies and continuing education programs that promote pedagogical practices more aligned with the real demands of Early Childhood Education (SEISDEDOS; FERNÁNDEZ; GELABERT, 2018).



In facing the challenges of complex classes, it became evident that building collaborative relationships with families plays an essential role. This type of support strengthens, encourages, and points out paths to overcoming challenges for teachers at the beginning of their careers.

4.4. Relationships with families

One of the most significant challenges in my teaching journey was establishing effective interaction with the families of the children. In the early stages of my career, influenced by the behavior of more experienced colleagues, I adopted a distant and unwelcoming posture with the families, which hindered the building of positive bonds and generated unnecessary tensions. Although unintentional, this attitude implicitly reflected a contest for authority, as if it were necessary to reaffirm “who was in control” in the classroom. In fact, this stance was directly related to the typical insecurity of novice teachers, especially in the first years of their careers when the lack of professional experience can lead to inadequate and less strategic decisions.

Over time, I understood the negative impact of a distant posture towards families and recognized that building an effective partnership with them is fundamental for teaching practice, especially in Early Childhood Education. Lima (2021) emphasizes that collaboration between teachers and families is a central element in Early Childhood Education, as it not only favors the holistic development of children but also strengthens educational relationships. The author highlights that this partnership must be based on ethical and meaningful interaction, surpassing superficial exchanges to achieve a true alignment of expectations between school and family.

Although essential, the construction of a dialogical relationship between early childhood education teachers and the families of children faces several challenges. Gonzalez (2024) notes that “many times, we find ourselves paralyzed in the face of the difficulty of truly involving families in the school context, discussing and reflecting with them on topics such as care, education, dreams, expectations, difficulties, and conceptions of childhood” (p. 13).

A moment of transformation in my teaching practice occurred during a parents' meeting when I recognized the need to adopt a more welcoming and collaborative stance. By publicly apologizing for the distant and unloving attitudes that had caused conflicts, I realized the transformative impact of dialogue and empathy in building more harmonious relationships. This gesture not only marked a significant change in my practice but also

highlighted the importance of establishing a partnership based on mutual respect and collaboration between school and family.

Literature emphasizes the importance of collaboration between teachers and families in Early Childhood Education. Zabalza Beraza and Zabalza Cerdeiriña (2011) point out that building close and trusting relationships between these actors is essential to integrate the school and family contexts. This articulation enables a broader understanding of the individual needs of children, promoting the creation of a safe and welcoming educational environment, which is essential for holistic development. The authors also highlight that this relationship allows for the planned and intentional integration of care and education, ensuring more effective pedagogical practices aligned with the specificities of each child.

Thus, the lived experience highlighted the relevance of the partnership between school and family as a central axis to ensure the quality of teaching work in Early Childhood Education. The change in posture, backed by theoretical foundations, allowed for the development of a more welcoming and collaborative practice, where dialogue with families became an essential component. This approach contributed to positive impacts both on children's development and on the school environment in a broader sense.

5. CONCLUSION

This study, which is based on the autobiographical narrative of a novice teacher, presented some challenges faced by teachers at this stage of their professional lives. This phase is characterized by intense processes of learning, adaptation, and pedagogical re-signification, often permeated by a confrontation between idealized expectations and the concrete demands of teaching practice.

We highlight from the reflections that the construction of teacher identity is a gradual process, involving observation, constant reflection, and the pursuit of autonomy. Aspects such as managing complex classrooms, the relationship with families, and the articulation between care and education require a reflective stance. It was also identified that the absence of structured institutional support constitutes a significant barrier, reinforcing the urgency for public policies and pedagogical support programs for novice teachers.

We recognize that this phase, although challenging, is also filled with learning and transformations, moments of conflict and insecurity that need to be accompanied. Spaces for discussion and reflection on what has been experienced in the classroom and words of

encouragement are essential in this process. It is a dialogue between lived practice and theoretical constructions, possible only through narratives, a moment in which the person and their experiences gain concreteness, are re-signified, and become visible to themselves.

In sharing this autobiographical narrative, we aim not only to present real situations from teaching practice but also to inspire perseverance and resilience. As Paulo Freire stated (1993, p. 59), “do not let the fear of the difficult paralyze you,” reinforcing that difficulties can be redefined as opportunities for the construction of knowledge and the strengthening of professional identity.

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