

Analysis of pedagogical practices in early childhood education based on quality management

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ABSTRACT

The article connotes the study of quality management practices in Early Childhood Education, as a current problem at regional level and in Chile. The objective was: to analyze the coherence of pedagogical practices with the Quality Management Model for Early Education in Kindergartens in La Araucanía (Chile). A Research-Action-Participatory Research design was built, which generated cycles of reflections based on a diagnosis that strengthens continuous improvement. From there, the action based on accompaniment and its implementation for the development of evaluation and feedback as key inputs for decision making.

Keywords: Quality of education; Preschool teacher; Early childhood education; Educational management.

Introduction

In 2015, the Member States of the United Nations committed to work towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Point IV of the Agenda contains the Sustainable Development Goal, whose actions commit to guaranteeing quality, inclusive and equitable education that promotes opportunities for access to lifelong learning (United Nations [UN], 2015). Target 4.2 of the SDGs proposes to increase the percentage

of children under five whose development is on track in terms of health, psychosocial well-being and learning.

Data compiled by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) show that one in four five-year-olds has never received any form of Early Childhood Education. This represents 35 million of the 137 million five-year-olds worldwide. In this context, UNESCO's World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in November 2022, reaffirmed the right of every child to quality care and education, and the need for greater investment in education between birth and eight years of age (Fernandez, 2022).

These data serve as an argument for States to guarantee quality management systems in early childhood education. In the case of Chile, this was established after the enactment of Law No. 20.529 in August 2011. The implementation of the Quality Assurance System for Kindergarten Education (SAC-EP, 2020) is a milestone in quality management, as it provides specific tools for evaluation, monitoring and supervision of the first level of education. With this Law, from the Sala Cuna level onwards (Kindergarten Education) to Basic and High School, are part of a unique system, of high complexity and technical quality, whose purpose is to ensure that children and students receive a quality education (Government of Chile, 2021).

The SAC-EP is evidence of the will of the Chilean state to promote higher quality standards in early childhood in the 11,167 state-funded establishments (Parvularia Undersecretary of Pre-school Education [SEP], 2022). Although it should be noted that the mandatory nature of the Transition level is currently in the draft bill stage and approved by the Chamber of Deputies (SEP, 2023). However, with the exception of Cuba, the last year of the initial level is compulsory in all the countries of the Latin American region. In Mexico, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, compulsory schooling begins at the age of three. In Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama and Uruguay, it starts at the age of four. In Chile, Dominican Republic, Colombia, Nicaragua, Honduras and Paraguay, at age five (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2019).

In addition, Chile has 31 universities that offer the career of Early Childhood Education in daytime, four in evening and one blended (José, 2023), all have different years of accreditation, after external evaluations of external evaluation processes of the National Accreditation Commission. In the content of the training itineraries of this career, standards related to the content of the SAC-EP are addressed in courses of Educational Management, Leadership and Pedagogical Practices (mainly in the intermediate and final ones), as well

as in the competencies associated with these courses. The focus is on planning, evaluation, feedback and continuous improvement, based on reflection and collaborative work. This suggests the need to strengthen the professional competencies of practicing teachers in the areas of educational planning, organization, management and evaluation of educational practices. These management processes are premised on the articulation with the particularities of child development from birth to six years of age, due to their impact on future school stages (SEP, 2018). In this context, Chile consolidates progress with respect to its institutional framework, public financing, increased coverage and improvement of the education curriculum (Manríquez and Reyes, 2022).

Regarding the relevance of strengthening quality in early childhood education, scientific evidence shows that up to six years of age, development is transcendental, given the changes that occur in the human brain, which turns out to be "the most sensitive thing on earth, nothing more fragile and nothing more powerful" (Poblete, 2022, p. 54). In fact, Förster and Lopez (2022) state that by one year of life the brain has tripled its birth weight due to increased vascularization, neuron size, glia proliferation and synaptogenesis, especially in the frontal lobes. Before the age of six, the brain mass will have quadrupled and acquired approximately 90% of its adult volume. The mastery of such knowledge in management practices prevents the promotion of an education with overstimulation that is inconsistent with children's development and counterproductive for their integral education, by generating socioemotional imbalances and learning disorders (Calzadilla-Pérez and San Martín, 2023, p. 102).

In general, quality pedagogical practices that are consistent with child development correspond to the objectives of early education and are also an ethical and moral imperative. It is also evident that good pedagogical practices have a component of social responsibility, since the Early Childhood Education professional must accompany children in their daily learning and continuous growth (Poblete and Boelken, 2022). Thus, the early childhood educator (as it is called in Chile) in his or her performance generates essential conditions to guarantee the progression of learning in the educational trajectory of children and their personal growth.

Consistent with the above, the Chilean Quality Management Model for Early Education is implemented in the National Kindergarten Board (Junta Nacional de Jardines Infantiles [JUNJI], 2013 a, b), is based on principles of: leadership with a vision for the future; orientation to the satisfaction of children and their families; participation and commitment; culture of measurement and continuous improvement; social responsibility; and, orientation

to results. Therefore, this Model should become one of the main frameworks for focusing pedagogical practices, based on a systemic driving force (leadership and management, family participation and commitment, and continuous improvement, based on reflection and collaborative work), consistent with the results.

However, research on the application of this model shows what remains to be done in Chilean Kindergarten Education. A random search of publications in the Google Scholar engine between 2018 and 2023 found works referring to the implementation of the Quality Management Model in Kindergarten Education (Poblete and Boelken, 2022); the design of structural and process variables of a Quality Assurance Model (for private kindergartens) (Chamorro and Ojeda, 2018); and, the exploratory-qualitative analysis of the opinion of directors and educators of public kindergartens in the Maule region (Benavides-Moreno et al., 2019). Even so, the insufficient amount of published research evidences the relevance of studies in this regard, so that they manage to consolidate the implementation of the Model and achieve sustainability in pedagogical practices based on quality management.

In fact, in classroom activities, these practices and the success of their results have been focused on the fulfillment of institutional goals established for the VTF modality and the observations and challenges posed by the technical advisors of the National Board of Kindergartens (JUNJI). Considering this reality, it is necessary to advance in the search for the installation of critical-reflective processes that promote continuous improvement as "learning organizations" (Gairín and Ion, 2021).

The above means a contribution is required of new studies in such context arises work, which addresses the following problem: insufficient scientific evidence on the consistency of pedagogical practices with the Quality Management Model for Early Education in technical teams of establishments in the region of La Araucanía (Chile). Consequently, the objective was: to analyze the coherence of pedagogical practices with the Quality Management Model for Early Education in teams of VTF kindergartens and nursery schools in the commune of Padre las Casas, La Araucanía.

The research was carried out from a dialectic approach, under a paradigm of Action-Research-Participatory Research, whose cycles of reflection-action in an ascending spiral allowed the elaboration of transformation actions and the generation of learning. Guba and Lincoln (1984), argued that transformation seeks dialogue in order to transform false apprehensions of reality that promote changes in structures in a bottom-up manner. Denzin and Lincoln (2012), point out that qualitative research is a situated activity, which locates the observer in the world. In the specific case of this study, it focused on analyzing the

coherence between the Quality Management Model and the pedagogical practices of the management teams of VTF kindergartens and day care centers, in aspects of educational process management.

Development

The research was carried out in permanent and continuous interaction in each educational unit, with direct participation in the activity room of the kindergartens and meetings of technical planning and curricular organization. She also took an active part in the management of the educational process as another member of the team, always assuming with the informants a natural and discreet participation in training activities and educational reflection, whose main focus was leadership and pedagogical practice. It should be noted that, for the purpose of this study, the performance of the members of the management team of each educational organization was analyzed in the dimension referred to the application of the Quality Management Model in Kindergarten Education, all of which was carried out under the prior signature of an informed ethical consent.

Data collection techniques

The field notebook was used to collect information, as a technique based on observation, in addition to the interview and the documentary analysis guide. These facilitated the collection of information that was subsequently analyzed in the problem diagnosis stage, the results of which were used to generate improvement actions.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria. Participants

The selection of the participants was made considering the homogeneity in the dynamics and reality of the different VTF establishments in the region of La Araucanía, under the following inclusion criteria:

To be a qualified Early Childhood Educator in the case of director and level educator, and in the case of nursery assistant, to have a Higher Level Technical Degree.

Work in a kindergarten and/or VTF nursery for a period of three years for professionals and two years for technical personnel.

Ethical willingness to undertake research.

Socio-cultural ties with the study area.

All participants who did not meet at least one of the inclusion criteria were excluded. The application of these criteria made it possible to form the study participants:

Six female kindergarten educators with at least three years of professional experience in the study area.

Six kindergarten educators with at least three years of professional experience in the study area, and who fulfill the function of level educators in direct work with children.

Six Child Care Technicians with at least two years of experience.

Technical coordinators of kindergartens and nursery schools.

Results

This section presents the results obtained in this study, through a graphic representation that shows the information collected on educational processes, specifically, with respect to the pedagogical practices observed in each educational unit. It is important to point out that a rubric was structured with its descriptors and respective categories, for analysis purposes.

As for the organization of the information obtained, for a better analysis and understanding, it was organized considering three sub-dimensions, which are detailed below:

Preparation for teaching, which incorporates key aspects related to planning and evaluation of the teaching and learning process.

Classroom teaching, which considers the direct involvement of the early childhood educator in the development of learning experiences for children.

Curricular evaluation and implementation, which addresses the different levels of curricular concretion in relation to pedagogical management instruments.

The observation of Figure 1 allowed the analysis of teaching practices in the three subdimensions and in each of the six schools studied. In this regard, a high level of classroom presence of the Early Childhood Educator in her teaching practice was identified. However, a low percentage of achievement in teaching preparation was detected, which was evidenced by the insufficient use of the inputs provided by planning and evaluation for reflection and improvement of educational practice. It was observed that teachers' actions are developed in parameters that indicate low educational quality, since their intervention does not clearly present the what, how, for what, with what and with whom to organize the teaching-learning process.

Source: Self elaboration

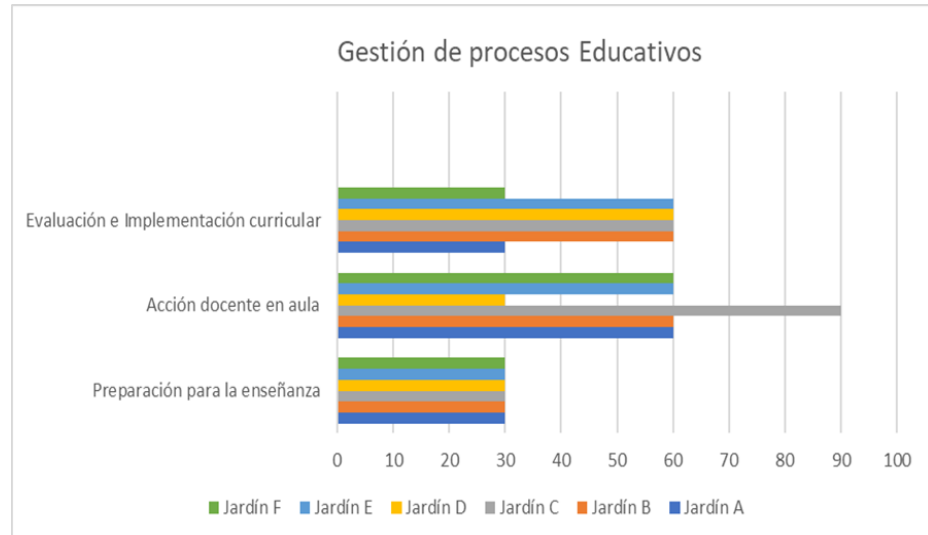


Figure 1. Pedagogical practices analyzed

It should be noted that the role of the early childhood educator defines her as a pedagogical leader (SEP, 2018, 2019, 2021), therefore, the technical staff, the educational community and, most importantly, the children at her level, learn from what she does, says and expresses conceptually, procedurally and attitudinally. Now, in relation to planning, its main contribution lies in organizing pedagogical practice in a coherent manner, so that learning environments act in the direction intended by certain learning objectives. Therefore, it will always be an anticipatory formulation of that which is intended to be carried out in the classroom or where it is desired to situate the formative action (SEP, 2018).

The findings indicate that planning was mainly focused on the fulfillment of a pre-established schedule which, most of the time does not have articulation between the information collected, the analysis of pedagogical practices and decision making, whose frame of reference is the Institutional Educational Project (PEI). Therefore, a greater number of instances should be created where the evaluation of planning is considered, all of this, based on the feedback of the learning results obtained by children, in order to make the best pedagogical decisions.

The observation showed that the educator does not always take into account in her didactic planning and development of learning experiences the treatment of educational intentionality, especially at the lower level of the daycare center. This limitation limits the ability to respond clearly and intentionally to the particularities of children at this level, despite the fact that they are recognized as the center of the educational process. The above shows the need to install pedagogical practices that allow strengthening the understanding, analysis and implementation of an effective planning process that does

not neglect the formative aspect of the content taught and the skills that are formed in children, according to the learning objectives of the curriculum.

In accordance with the above, planning should be understood as a systematic and flexible process, in which the results of the teaching and learning process are organized and anticipated; all this, with the purpose of guiding the pedagogical practice, according to its protagonists (Ministry of Education [MINEDUC], 2016).

The findings also indicated that, in the educational units, early childhood educators have an evaluation instrument that was developed by some internal and/or external agent, which passes from one year to another, without required improvements. The professionals who lead the educational process do not have a level of appropriation of knowledge that would allow them to have inputs for educational reflection and, therefore, which limits decision making under the clear and precise information that can be provided by the information collection instruments.

The background information collected indicated that there is an analysis of the evaluation focused on observation indicators, not so on the learning objectives oriented by the Curricular Bases of Kindergarten Education (SEP, 2018), which evidenced a deviation from the purpose posed by a good evaluative system. Therefore, the collection of information through the application of diagnostic, formative or summative evaluation instruments constitute the basis, on which decisions should be made and, in light of these results, elaborate improvement plans leading to achievements at the classroom and institution level, based on the acquisition of relevant and meaningful learning of children and the satisfaction of families, as addressed in the MGC-EP.

Another important finding was related to the management of the results of learning assessments, which, in general, were archived, perceiving the assessment as a process that was more administrative than pedagogical. This limits its positioning as a planning instrument and an input for decision-making. This shows the need to train participating educators in the fundamentals of the role of evaluation in the achievement of quality learning, despite the fact that at the curricular level there are guidelines that lack precision regarding the relevance of monitoring and feedback processes.

The quality management of early childhood educators is inherent to their professional role, therefore, the deployment of quality pedagogical practices requires decision making and the articulation of their actions with the seal of the PEI, made explicit in the vision, mission and values of the educational community. This situation showed that the educators were not trained for a performance that visualized their mastery of disciplinary

and pedagogical contents required for a meaningful teaching and learning process. This weakness limits her to effectively exercise pedagogical leadership, which affects her authority in front of the team, so she assumes a passive and receptive role, although her attitudes to generate links with the rest of the members of the technical team are recognized.

The situation described shows little clarity in the roles and functions of each member of the educational team, so that, without pedagogical leadership, decision making is centered on the adult. Adult-centered professional behaviors tend to leave in second place the welfare, care, planning, development and monitoring of quality pedagogical practices, whose central focus are children. Therefore, the IEP, its vision, mission, seal, principles, values and educational proposal, in general, are relegated and the attempt to maintain states of harmony and not generate conflicts between adults predominates.

It is well known that pedagogical work often means changing educational practices rooted in people's behavior and knowledge. Consequently, this situation generates tensions and, naturally, a lot of resistance. For this reason, it is necessary to have educators empowered in educational management, with strong knowledge in the disciplinary and pedagogical fields, who have knowledge of the characteristics of the group of children and their particularities, where permanent evaluation is a key input for pedagogical reflection in the pursuit of continuous improvement. This sets the challenge of taking up the results of the evaluation instances and the characteristics of the development of children and their families for the planning of learning experiences.

It should not be forgotten that there is an ethical and moral responsibility of the early childhood educator to develop quality educational practices for the benefit of the children in her care; however, this will require the development of competencies and skills that facilitate the transition from the absence of leadership to transformational and distributed leadership. The MGC-EP defines children as the protagonists of the pedagogical process, placing them at the center of the educational process, so all actions and activities "are aimed at identifying and satisfying their needs, offering challenges for their development and responding to the educational expectations of their families" (JUNJI, 2013 b, p. 7).

Conclusions

The critical reflection of the findings is fundamental, since the Quality Management Model for Early Education is considered an effective and efficient instrument in the development of educational practices and thus responds to the goals and purposes of this level. For this purpose, planning and evaluation should be articulated as central axes for decision making by the early childhood educator in her professional role, thus giving meaning, coherence and intentionality to the pedagogical practice.

The application of the instruments and the research technique pointed out that learning experiences do not always propose an educational intentionality. This situation does not allow a clear response to the particularities of boys and girls, and to the formative nature of all pedagogical action. The lack of explicitness of intentionality violates the principles of the Kindergarten Education Curricular Bases, such as wellbeing, unity, singularity, activity, play, relationship, meaning and empowerment. Therefore, it is essential to consolidate enriched and comfortable educational environments where cognitive, affective, positive interactions and play have a central place.

It was concluded that there is a need to strengthen the competencies of the educators when delimiting the didactic action in each moment of the learning experience (beginning, development, closing). Among the scenarios for this are training sessions, monitoring of the management team and access to continuing education programs on the subject. However, an essential scenario for strengthening these competencies is the accompaniment and technical-pedagogical guidance of the early childhood educator by more experienced professionals. This, in turn, should allow her to propose experiences that integrate the cognitive and socio-affective development of boys and girls, and to select educational resources that facilitate the child's protagonism through the exploration of the materials.