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# Teachers' agency in the implementation of an early childhood education policy program in schools in Bogotá, Colombia

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## Abstract

The childhood national policy in Colombia recognizes the importance of quality in early childhood education (ECE). In this context, the government of the district of Bogotá (2012–2016) proposed the program “Quality preschool in the Public Educational System” to expand the coverage of early education and provide comprehensive care to children aged 3–5 years within the public educational system. This article explores the ways in which the policy program is implemented in schools. Employing an ethnographic approach, this study focuses on the experiences of teachers from five schools that have faced the challenges of integrating the two new grades of early childhood education in formal school settings. By analyzing the educational strategies designed and implemented by teachers in their daily routines and the meaning they assign to these strategies, this study provides evidence that teachers do not simply reproduce the institutionalized discourses; instead, teachers negotiate, resist, adapt, and recreate experiences in relation to school times, spaces, activities, and materials by developing strategies more responsive to children's needs. The concept of agency is central to understand how teachers end up generating practices that lead to new forms of individual and social transformation.

**Keywords:** Early childhood education, Teachers' agency, Early childhood policy, Colombia

## Introduction

*Over the years, children have taught me many things; children have a lot of knowledge when they first come to school. I cannot assume that they come with an empty little head because it is not true...I assume that a child is a person, but to do that I also need to question myself and my role as a teacher to recognize that we are facilitators, in the sense that we can create conditions for children to develop their full potential (Maria, pre-school teacher).*

Maria (pseudonym) is an elementary teacher who participated in the implementation of a policy program for the integration of 3- to 4-year-old children into formal schools in Bogotá. Maria is a willing and receptive teacher who has 30 years of professional

experience working with children. She participated in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) policy program implementation, and in this process, she has taken risks and reflected on her teaching while feeling the pressure of preparing children for elementary school. In the above-quoted fragment, Maria talks about how her experiences with children have shaped her understanding of them. She is convinced that one of her talents is to interact empathically and respectfully with children and to be open to the possibility of learning and building a relationship with them.

The Initial Education Program for early childhood in the Bogota Humana 2012–2016 policy, called “Quality preschool in the Public Educational System” was proposed with the intention of providing comprehensive care, ensuring initial education, care, nutrition and well-being, and with a differential approach, to children aged 3–5 years within the public educational sector. This program, which we analyze in this paper, entailed the incorporation of two grades in the formal school system with the purpose of expanding the coverage of early education and thus guaranteeing the permanent and quality access to education for children, in particular for vulnerable and disadvantaged families.

The implementation of the program in the daily life of the school becomes a challenge for the institutions and for the teachers as Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Elementary Education (EE) are different educational stages that involve different organizational and curricular dimensions. The pedagogical work in elementary education focuses mainly on academic instruction through activities with teacher-directed instructions (Cerdeña-Gutiérrez, 2003). Instead, pedagogical activities in early education are less standardized and are based on children’s interests, skills, and knowledge to promote an integrated development. The teachers who assumed the incorporation of the two grades were EE teachers with no experience or prior training in early education. This becomes a challenge for the teachers because the curriculum and the guidelines of EE did not address the guidelines of ECE in Colombia that have as axes the literature, the exploration of the environment, play, and art. Likewise, the organization of times and spaces in ECE required making the routines established in formal education more flexible.

Although Maria has felt the pressure and the challenges of the program implementation, she, and other teachers who participated in this study, found the policy program as a mediating experience that afforded them an opportunity to offer students innovative learning opportunities. The program implementation entailed time and self-reflection. This article analyzes the implementation from the perspective of the teachers’ agency. We understand agency as the capacity of teachers of making choices and implementing changes within the structure and culture in which they work (Biesta et al. 2015; Datnow, 2020). The importance of teacher agency for the analysis of the ECE program implementation “lies in the fact that teachers have the capacity to agentively adopt, adapt or even resist newly implemented policies and programs” (Cong-Lem, 2021, p. 718). In this study, through the enactment of agency teachers transformed policy discourse in creative and contextualized school-based practices while negotiating their identities within the context of a policy reform (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). We focus on teachers’ experiences to discuss how they deal with the process of implementing the policy program. The data presented in this paper provide evidence that teachers like Maria do not simply reproduce the educational discourses; instead, they resist or negotiate the implementation of policies within the scholastic institutional routines (Camargo-Abello & Guerrero, 2016).

### Early childhood education and care in Colombia

In order to understand the process of implementing an early childhood education policy program, it is necessary to present the context of its emergence. Since 1990, with the declaration of Education for All in Jomtien, a tendency to favor and strengthen education in the early years of children has been consolidated. It encouraged the world community to promote and give accessible Education for All, stating that every person—child, youth, and adult—shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs. These approaches were reaffirmed in the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), which put emphasis on the strategic directions to strengthen early childhood care and education. In this context, the underdeveloped countries that did not have initial compulsory education began to include it. Colombia as part of this movement, in 1991, ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child enacted in 1989 and in the same year the New Constitution declared that basic education and at least one year of preschool were compulsory.

The education of 3 and 4-year-old children, without being compulsory, used to be under the jurisdiction of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF), in particular for the lower income sectors of the population. In Colombia, education is divided into two sectors: public and private. In general, the public system is free and serves the poorest populations, while access to the private system is limited to those who can afford it. This has implied a clear division that reproduces the differences of social class in the country, deepening the belief that private education is better than public education. This gap was wider prior to the Colombian Constitution of 1991, when the public system offered compulsory EE only to children from the age of 5, while the private sector could receive children from the age of 2.

To address this situation of inequality and social segregation, the local development plan "Bogotá Humana 2012–2016" proposed the policy program "Quality preschool in the Public Educational System" to integrate the full ECE cycle into the public schools. It implied including two more years (kindergarten and preschool) to support children from low-income families. Within this framework, the Bogota Department of Education took up the challenge of providing education to 121,004 children between the ages of 3 and 4 in 252 public schools.<sup>1</sup> The implications of this integration process were two: firstly, the district of education had to incorporate the pedagogical, technical, and management guidelines of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute. Secondly, schools were forced to make important pedagogical and organizational changes in order to integrate the new two grades.

According to the national education law, the preschool education goal was to contribute to the integrated development of children, through pedagogical and recreational socialization experiences (Congreso Colombia, 1994). However, in practice, the mandatory preschool grade (kindergarten) offered in formal schools was conducted to train students in academic skills necessary to succeed in the formal educational system (Cerdeña-Gutiérrez, 1980, 2003). It involved training to develop motor skills, readiness, motivation for reading and writing, and for the solutions of problems that involve

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<sup>1</sup> The private sector continues to offer children one more year than the public schools.

mathematical operations. Instead, with the program of integration of the complete cycle of early childhood education, the main objectives were to promote experiences of literature, the exploration of the environment, play, and art in order to achieve the integrated development of children. Numerous studies have reported that the current focus on academic instruction in kindergarten and elementary school ignores important aspects of children's socio-emotional development and that the transition between these two cycles is associated with changes that directly affect the children, the teachers, and the family (Brown et al., 2021; Katz, 2009; Woodhead & Oates, 2007). On this respect González-Moreira et al. (2021) state:

*...there is a change in the educational, global, multifunctional, and dynamic consideration of ECE, which is losing importance in the PE stage (Argos et al., 2011; Castro et al., 2012; Cubillos et al., 2017). This means that there is not always continuity in children's learning (Margetts, 2002). The transition to the next stage abandons the game as a key methodology and loses its pedagogical value (Argos et al., 2011; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Tamayo, 2014). In addition, there are changes in the organization of time. Spaces also become less flexible, in a structure with fewer learning opportunities and oriented to more controlled learning (Castro et al., 2012; Cubillos et al., 2017). (p. 442).*

The incorporation of initial education opened a new field that did not exist either in practice or in the theory of formal education (Peralta, 2021). The institutions that implemented the ECE program in Bogota did not have teachers trained to work with children 3–5 years old. Although the teachers were trained in a preschool program, the training in these programs was based on the preparation of children for primary school and not to work from the perspective of ECE that focuses on play, exploration of the environment, the art, and literature. Consequently, the EE teachers had to assume the ECE grades and confront the challenges posed by this endeavor.

In this paper, we focus on understanding the views and experiences of teachers delivering the aforementioned integration program in five different schools in Bogota. The information was collected in 2014 to document the experiences of teachers carrying out the integration of the two new grades in public schools. By examining the strategies created and performed by early childhood teachers in their classrooms and the meanings they assigned to these activities, we learned how teachers developed alternative ways of relating with children that resisted the discourses and practices established in schools without previous experience in ECE.

### **Early childhood: a contemporary challenge**

The benefits of public and private investment in programs for early childhood development have been recognized internationally. There is a consensus that investing in young children not only benefits them directly but also that the returns are seen throughout the course of their lives and, in the long term, benefits the offspring of this population. This, in turn, makes these efforts self-sustainable in the long term, having a significant impact on society. Researchers also agree on the importance of ECE for children development (Burchinal et al. 2022; Paananen et al., 2015).

While there is an agreement that initial education can have a positive impact on a child's further development, countries have implemented diverse options to include it within their educational systems, generally focusing on preparation for school. In Colombia, the efforts made by non-governmental organizations, government, and civil society were crucial in making visible the importance of ECE for the social and economic performance of the country. Thus, in February 2011, the National Strategy for a Comprehensive Early Childhood Care was launched, "*De cero a siempre*" as a national policy. The priority of "*De cero a siempre*" is to work for comprehensive early childhood care, which is understood as the provision of services for children from gestation to 6 years of age, in terms of health, nutrition, education, care, and protection, with quality criteria to promote childhood development. To manage the program, the Intersectoral Commission for Early Childhood was created, which is the entity responsible for articulating the institutions that implement the policy.

Bogota, the capital of the country, has become a national leader in ECE programs through the construction of pedagogical guidelines, the training of educational agents, and the development of programs that cover an increasing number of children. The qualitative assessment of the public policy of early education and comprehensive care for children from 3 to 5 years of age, carried out by UNESCO (2016), highlights the commitment of the Bogota Department of Education to improve the quantity and quality of initial education services and comprehensive care for early childhood. Within this leadership, the city has taken initiatives that include the program presented in this document, which incorporates two levels of ECE in public schools. The ECE policy insists that to promote children's development, teachers need to create enriched environments, and significant educational experiences, interactions, and actions. All this work revolves around four components established by the policy on early childhood education: exploration of the environment, artistic expressions, literature, and play.

### Teachers' agency

Teacher agency is a category that has been recognized as an important quality influential factor for school improvement and educational change (Biesta et al. 2015; Cong-Lem, 2021; Datnow, 2020). In this study, we draw from the sociocultural perspectives of agency that are grounded on the assumption that sociocultural contexts are important in human learning and activities, and, therefore, in education transformations. We understand teacher agency as the capacity teachers have to make decisions, take action, and perform changes as they advocate for their professional and moral beliefs and responsibilities (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; cited in Sánchez-Suzuki & Zúñiga, 2018; Sheridan et al., 2011). An increasingly recognized factor of effective educational reforms is the role the teachers play as institutional agents. The literature about "policy enactment" highlights that the social conflict and micro-political processes that characterize schools become particularly evident during reform processes (Alonzo, et al., 2021; Ball, 2008) and that teachers throughout said processes are both policy subjects and policy actors (Braun et al., 2011).

In this paper, the notion of agency is used to understand the ways teachers' individual efforts interact with material resources, social institutions, and cultures of which it is a part within the school and beyond it (Biesta et al. 2015; Datnow, 2020). We employ the

notion of agency because it helps us understand how teachers draw on their personal resources to make decisions about what is best for children within the context of a policy implementation. Through the enactment of teachers' agency, the teachers convert policy discourse in creative and contextualized school-based practices, challenging the limitations imposed by an established school culture.

Eteläpelto et al. (2013) and Lau et al. (2022) state that agency allows teachers to negotiate their identities within contexts of policy reforms and changing educational practices. Similarly, Sloan (2006) uses the concept of identity and agency "to better understand the ways they experience and respond to accountability-explicit curriculum policies" (p. 125). Likewise, Buchanan (2015) and Sannino (2010) have analyzed the role of agency in teachers' response to educational reforms, including resistance, negotiation, and adaptation. All these authors see agency as an essential aspect of teachers' professionalism. However, there is still a lack of clarity about what it means to talk about teacher agency and how it operates in schools. In this paper, we are interested in the second aspect. By analyzing agency within the school routines, we evidence how teachers approach children's needs within the context of an early childhood educational program. We examine teachers discourses and practices in their daily school routines, highlighting the way they position themselves as ECE educators, and the way they negotiate, resist, adapt, and recreate experiences in relation to school times, spaces, activities, and materials by developing strategies more responsive to children's needs. The concept of agency allows us to understand how teachers end up generating practices that lead to new forms of individual and social transformation. Agency, then, is that step that crosses the line between the impassivity and the desire to foster categorical actions that create new cultural worlds (Holland et al., 1998).

In this study, teachers' agency is not analyzed as a reaction to the policy but in relation to its implementation within schools. This is the incorporation of a program within institutions with an established culture. In this respect, we assume that the educational institution is a social and historical construction. It is shaped by complex processes of reproduction and change, which are sometimes imperceptible. It is the product of the active relationship that is sustained with elements of their structure, organization and functioning (norms, orientations, dispositions). These institutions have developed a particular culture in which teachers constantly create and recreate their meanings and practices. Pantic (2017) asserts that teachers' agency varies with the levels of autonomy and power within structures and cultures, which can facilitate or hinder agency. In this context teachers find possibilities of existence and agency and contribute to the permanent resignification of the school culture. Accordingly, school culture is understood as a set of values, norms, feelings, customs, beliefs, principles, rituals, and dispositions that are based on the interaction of the school community, as well as on the shared meanings they provide to the actions involved in that interaction. Although school culture is a collective and shared construction, it is far from being unanimous and, despite having a past that marks and conditions its construction and existence, it is not static or linear. The school culture integrates and expresses diversity, complexity, and sometimes ambiguity.

*To participate and live in a culture means reinterpreting it, reproducing it as much as transforming it. Culture both opens and restricts the horizon of imagination and*



*practice of those who live within it* (Pérez-Gómez, 1998, p. 17).

To analyze the context of teachers' agency we signify school culture as the established order that is supported on a historical legacy and that sometimes hinders its transformations. In this context, teachers' agency appears as actions derived from their experiences that provoke ruptures.

## Methods

From an ethnographic perspective, this study examined teachers' experiences on the implementation of the early childhood integration policy. Ethnography here is understood as the study of the cultural lives of individuals (Agar, 1986). We employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Agar, 1986) to explore the experiences of teachers in schools implementing the aforementioned educational policy. Regarding the use of ethnography in ECE settings Ritchie (2019) states:

*Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology particularly suited to research projects that aim to gain in-depth understandings of the lived experience of children and teachers in early childhood care and education settings. It offers researchers the opportunity to discover in an emergent, responsive way the intricate dynamics of interactions and motivations of the members of this setting via long-term engagement with participants on a regular daily basis* (p. 1).

In the particular school contexts, ethnography allowed us to learn from teachers the cultural knowledge through the analyses of the discursive construction of everyday activity. Adair (2011) declares that ethnographic research for early childhood has a great potential to inform early childhood policy. She highlights the pertinence of ethnography to reveal how teachers respond to changing practices and populations and how it can inform the challenges and opportunities of reforms from the perspective of the involved actors. McLaughlin (1987) argues:

*"...policy is transformed as individuals interpret and respond to it. What actually is delivered or provided under the aegis of a policy depends finally on the individual at the end of the line...Organizations don't innovate or implement change, individuals do. Individuals responsible for carrying out a policy act not only from institutional incentives, but also from professional and personal motivation"* (p. 173–174).

We focus on how teachers have implemented the ECE integration policy in five schools and on the teachers' beliefs underlying this implementation. The five public institutions were selected by the Bogota Department of Education. Initially, a call was made to all public schools in Bogota that were implementing the program. The invitation offered the institutions that would be selected the possibility of being documented and published as models for the implementation of the program in other schools. The institutions sent a written text describing the experience of implementing the ECE program and also gave a brief presentation to the Committee of Evaluators of the Bogota Department of Education. This committee evaluated the experiences with an instrument that assessed the level of development of the following components: the connection between educational actors (families, teachers, and children); the connection between the grades of the ECE cycle, and between the ECE and the EE cycles; the incorporation of at least two policy

**Table 1** Teachers' information

Name	Gender	School	Years of experience	Educational background
María	Female	JF	30	BA in preschool education
Melody	Female	MBA	11	BA in preschool education
Marcela	Female	PF	12	BA in preschool education
Silvia	Female	SB	10	BA in Psychopedagogy
Emilia	Female	JFB	26	BA in preschool education

programs proposed by the Bogota Department of Education in the institution; the work on the pillars of ECE and the connection between two or more pillars; and the existence of a pedagogical approach to work with diverse populations. With these criteria, the committee selected the five institutions presented here.

The authors of this paper were participant observers in the five schools included in this study. We both participated in the schools' daily activities and conducted interviews with teachers. We introduced ourselves to the teachers as researchers seeking to understand how the policy program was being implemented. Our intentions were explicit and clear. The information would be an input to improve the program that was being implemented in other public schools in Bogota.

The data collected have been rendered anonymous through the use of pseudonyms and the disguise of other signifiers. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the teachers that collaborated in the study.

We spent at least 1 day a week in each classroom over a period of four months in the middle of the school year. Teachers allowed us unlimited access to their classes and other activities they developed with the children. Participating in schools' daily activities provided strategic access to the routines and practices derived from the program implementation: children's arrival, organization of spaces and educational materials, recreation time, classroom activities, lunch or snack time, cleaning and organization of the classroom, and evaluation of the day activities. By employing participant observation and interviews with teachers, we acquired discursive and practical knowledge of teacher's educational experiences.

A series of semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data with the teachers. The interviews were audio recorded and took approximately an hour. We transcribed the interviews and after a close reading of these transcripts and field notes we formed initial codes that turn into six categories that included: history of the experience, relation to educational and childhood care policy, institutional management, pedagogical aspects, connection with the family and the community, and results of the experience. The interviews and observations were coded to account for these themes. We elaborated preliminary reports based on the description of these categories. The follow-up interviews were based on these reports that were shared and discussed with teachers.

After finishing the research project on which this article is based, we decided to revisit the data produced to further deepen the analysis of teachers' experiences to better understand how teachers faced policy implementation and acted with children in their daily routines. We analyzed the data in the spirit of the inductive analytical processes and through and established the diverse forms the teachers conceptualized and exercise their agency in



relation with the integration program implementation. Through a collaborative process of analysis, interpretation, and writing, we produced new meanings about the teachers' experiences, focusing on their capacity of agency to transform their interactions with children and their roles in their institutions.

It is important to note that the analysis and interpretation of the data constitute conceptual abstractions and represent not the history of an individual or group but the histories of many individuals or groups that they represent (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). When revisiting the data, we found that the diversity of teachers' practices could be interpreted from the category of agency and thus account for the different ways in which teachers assumed their work in ECE. We consider the process of analysis as a theoretical construction in which the analyst reduces data from many cases to concepts and converts them into sets of relationship statements that can be used to explain, in a general sense, what happens (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### **Results: teachers' forms of agency emerging in the early childhood educational policy program implementation**

The analysis of the data shows that teachers' agency is associated with different ways of action in which teachers display their personal, educational, and social resources to carry out the purposes they consider pertinent. To implement the ECE program, the teachers, who have been trained in EE, received training and pedagogical support from the Bogota Education Department in the pillars of ECE related to play, art, literature, and exploration of the environment and in the forms to realize it in the classroom. From this, teachers turn to creativity to develop their pedagogical action with their own resources and in the heterogeneity that characterizes them.

In this sense, teachers are not subjects determined by mandatory policies, but rather actors who, within the structures, seek transformations. Teachers implementing the program generate a variety of actions. Teachers have managed to position their thinking, empower themselves, and struggle with institutional constraints to take forward their initiatives. Our findings provide evidence of teachers' agency in different forms as they interact with school communities. The forms of agency can be read through the following four categories that are in alignment with the contexts of identity proposed by Holland et al. (1998):

- Teachers positioning themselves. Teachers are aware of their agency, a capacity that defines their identity as early childhood educators.
- Teachers Negotiating. Teachers as agents resist, negotiate, or adapt creatively to what happens in the schools.
- Teachers Authoring. Teachers recognize the possibilities of action and make decisions related to the visibility and mobilization of the program within the schools.
- Teachers creating new figured worlds. Teachers' agency produces transformations in schools.

#### **Teachers positioning themselves**

The early childhood teachers hold a renewal discourse that explicitly places them in a different position from that occupied by the other teachers of the educational institution.

For them, the current focus on the integrated development of children has led to an understanding of the non-cumulative character of their education and the value of including their interests and needs according to their own rhythms and moments of development. Teachers learn from experience the importance of these conceptions and enact the changes that occur in their own ways of understanding (Ball, 2008; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Teachers consider that ECE does not require, as it is traditionally conceived, “to prepare children for...” nor specific steps or requirements to be filled. It is an education devoted to children, that assumes its place as a social actor. Teachers express their work by assuming a distance from the school they have known, in which they have been trained. In the following excerpt, Marcela shares an experience of a collective drawing exercise with the mandala that allows children to go beyond the identification of colors, to underline the processes of interaction and the meanings of coloring for them.

*To perform an activity such as a mandala<sup>2</sup> allows for the intimate identification of every child in the drawing, they customize the colours and the meaning given to the drawing, while simultaneously recognize that they are next to others who also provide colours and meanings. Thus, developments associated to affective, social, motor, cognitive, artistic, communicative and expressive characteristics are promoted, surpassing experiences associated to a traditional educational paradigm that focuses on learning from a guide the primary and secondary colours. Children's mandalas are exhibited to make visible their work and to represent the group's unity (Interview, Marcela).*

*Al realizar una actividad como colorear permite que cada niño y niña se identifique de manera íntima dentro del dibujo y en esa medida personalice los colores que utiliza y el sentido que le da al dibujo, pero a la vez lo invita a reconocer que se encuentra junto a otros a quienes también debe otorgar colores, características y detalles. En esta medida involucra desarrollos asociados a lo afectivo, lo social, lo motriz, lo cognitivo, lo artístico, lo comunicativo y lo expresivo, superando así, cualquier experiencia de aquellas que ubicadas en un paradigma educativo tradicional se centran exclusivamente en el aprendizaje de los colores primarios o secundarios a partir de una guía. Las mándalas de todos los niños y niñas fueron expuestas en una de las paredes del salón, buscando visibilizar su trabajo y representar con esta composición la unidad del grupo (Entrevista a Marcela).*

For teachers like Marcela, the concepts and practices proposed by ECE focus on the interaction that enables a closer and affective construction of the teacher–child relationship. This interaction led teachers to recognize that working at the rhythm of children and recognizing their singularities connected meaningfully to them. These ways of recognizing themselves as early educators are coupled with the needs for change; they experience in relation to their peers' conceptions of them. In the social imaginary, preschool education tends to be equated with maternal care that anyone can carry out (without the need for training) and with activities that are fundamentally affective and, therefore,

<sup>2</sup> 'Mandala' a Sanskrit word means “Holy Circle.” A mandala is composed by a set of figures and concentric geometric shapes that represents universe elements.

of little or no significance to the school. A teacher reports her conversation with a co-worker after the policy program is presented at a meeting.

*It was necessary to introduce (in the school) 'what is early childhood.' The prevailing conception was that nothing was done with young children and that the only thing we did as teachers was to play. At our first presentation, when we explained what we do, a teacher colleague said, 'it is good to know what you do because I thought that you did nothing. (Interview, Maria).*

*Era necesario presentar, ¿qué es la primera infancia?, por la falta de reconocimiento que había tenido, porque la concepción es no hacen nada, solo se la pasan jugando y no tienen ni idea. Cuando hicimos nuestra primera presentación, me marcó tanto lo que dijo una compañera de primaria, porque ese día, les contamos qué era lo que hacíamos en primera infancia y ella dijo, "oiga pero que bueno saberlo", porque yo pensaba que ustedes, no hacían nada. (Entrevista a María).*

For Maria the school is not organized around areas of knowledge, but around the pillars supporting early childhood education: play, literature, art, and exploration of the environment. For teachers like María, implementing this idea involves important changes in their way of being and doing things. What we found is that teachers manage to take projects forward and make these pillars as the basis of their work. Likewise, in the following excerpt Emilia reflects on the meaning of playing and concludes that playing is not an instrumental activity in ECE and that it may well be a purpose in itself and a mediation for children's learning, in which learning is playing and playing is learning.

*Children learn when they play, they don't play to learn; and so, why deny these spaces they need that makes them happy? When children play, they communicate spontaneously, investigate, they choose with whom and what to play. When they play, there is planning, role setting, and playmate relationships. Playing implies thinking about others and requires communication, agreements and being respectful. The setting of playing is the space for interacting, thinking with their peers how differences are resolved. It is also a space for citizenship, autonomy, identity, coexistence and learning. (Interview, Emilia).*

*Los niños aprenden cuando están jugando, no juegan para aprender, entonces ¿cómo negar estos espacios de juego que ellos necesitan, y en los que están felices?. En el juego los niños ponen sus saberes frente a los de los otros, se comunican espontáneamente, indagan, eligen con quienes jugar, a qué jugar. Durante el juego hay planificaciones, establecimiento de roles, relaciones con los compañeros de juego. El juego está sujeto a pensar en el otro y exige intercomunicación, creación de acuerdos y respeto por estos. El juego es el espacio de relación, de pensar con su par cómo se resuelven las diferencias, es un espacio de construcción de ciudadanía, autonomía, identidad, convivencia y aprendizaje (Entrevista a Emilia).*

As Emilia reports, playing is a central aspect of the world of childhood (Shree & Shukla, 2016; Wood & Attfield, 2005). It is part of the child relationship with the people and the environment, with objects and spaces. By playing, children represent the constructions and developments of their life and context (MEN, 2014). As can be seen in the previous excerpts, early childhood teachers convey a discourse and practice with a sense

and conviction of the importance of their endeavor, as actors in charge of generating transformation, regardless of the particular contexts in which they work, because their agency allows for education to add value to the child's development.

### **Teachers' negotiating: resistance, negotiations, and adaptation as forms of agency**

School organization occurs in a school space and time that serve as a substrate for culture. The idea of space is structured around both a physical and a symbolic space containing teachers and children, and it has been somehow imprinted in how the behavior a given culture inhabits and belongs to that place. It is rare for the school to reflect on the meaning and sense of space and the way things are located. By doing so, ECE teachers contravene, negotiate, or resist many preconceptions of themselves.

### ***Teachers' resistance***

The use of time and space in school is orderly and disciplined. The resistance is identified within relations of power and domination as a way of actively opposing that course of time and use of space. Thus, teachers use strategies of resistance that accompany their decisions to work with the needs of the children. Discipline and conventional order of schools are transgressed with the arrival of the initial level of education. Hallway silences are enlivened by the songs of young children.

*The teacher asks children to get ready to go to the library. Autonomously children begin to organize in couples to go and just as they start walking, two girls start singing a very emotional song. As they walk, the other children join the singing, so that the group is heard in unison, drawing the attention of everyone in the halls. (Field-Journal).*

*La profe les pide que se organicen para ir a la biblioteca. En ese momento, de forma autónoma los niños y niñas comienzan a organizarse por parejas para dirigirse a su destino y apenas empiezan a caminar hacia la biblioteca, dos niñas dan inicio a un canto muy emotivo de una canción de su preferencia (probablemente de uno de sus programas de TV favoritos). A medida que avanzan, todos(as) van uniéndose al canto, de manera que, a unos pasos del salón, el grupo se escucha al unísono entonando aquella canción que tanto los emociona y que por supuesto llama la atención de todos(as) en los pasillos (Diario de Campo).*

This event transgresses one of the main concerns of teachers related to school organization: discipline, inside, and outside the classroom, as order and as silence. Transgressing the school routine is not easy; according to a teacher "the traditional way is the most expeditious although not necessarily the best." In general, traditional schools naturally and unquestioningly assume certain regulations—such as those related to silence when walking through corridors—without asking themselves what they intend to mobilize educationally and to whom they are directed. For 3- and 4-year-olds, making sense of these regulations can be quite difficult.

Moving away from routine school practices may worry teachers if they are not attentive to the meanings of the activities. The strategy of classroom projects helps break up with the student-sequencing requirement for learning and shows a resistance to planning, which, although it seems improvisational, is a permanent adaptation to the

educational needs of children. Both preschool children and children from an upper grade can be together in spaces where common interests sustain them according to their rhythm, attention, and desire.

*I shared the classroom project, how we worked and so on. I shared many of the things I did in preschool, he [another teacher] shared with me his experiences, we work together on activities, first-grade children along with younger children. (Interview, Marcela).*

*Le compartía el proyecto de aula, como lo trabajábamos y todo. Muchas de las cosas que yo hacía en preescolar se las compartía, él me compartía sus experiencias, trabajamos juntos en actividades podíamos hacer trabajos revueltos digamos, los niños de primero con los de transición. (Entrevista a Marcela).*

Teachers with their theoretical foundation and with the newly setup concepts have introduced into the school a will to engage in a constant reflection that leads them to the path of action based on children's interests, many times by improvising actions (Holland et al., 1998; Matsui, 2021).

### **Teachers' negotiations**

The school space, referring to the material and symbolic built environment (building, facilities, furniture, walls, corners, gardens, etc.), is not neutral, expresses values, and serves as a context for student learning, contributing to their education. The infrastructure available for young children is precarious in these institutions: without green spaces, without comfortable and spacious fields, with no possibility of mobilization, sometimes with dangerous staircases, without properly sized toilets, and with lack of air and poor ventilation.

Facing these precarious situations, teachers have carried out initiatives and projects to alter the physical space symbolically and make it suitable to the educational activities, without this being a limiting factor for their practice. For example, in one institution, the furniture was removed and placed against the walls to allow for an open classroom through which children could move freely. Already they had learned what these spaces meant and were prepared with their attitude for the activities without much language or orientation.

*I suggest that teachers use the 'ludoteca'... it is not only the space and the walls... we move many 'ludoteca' objects to the classrooms...my purpose was to motivate other teachers, to say 'we can,' 'this can be done.' If spaces are not given, then we must seek alternatives. The principal stated, 'this space can't be modified because the education district rules do not allow changes in its infrastructure use' then I gave her other ideas, so that we could use that space as we need it. (Interview, Melody).*

*Yo sugerí que nos quedáramos con la ludoteca, ...la ludoteca no solamente es el espacio y las cuatro paredes...también nosotras trasladamos muchas cosas de la ludoteca a las aulas. ...entonces la tarea mía fue motivar, encaminar a los otros maestros, decirles vamos, que sí podemos, esto se puede hacer, que los espacios no se dan, entonces busquemos alternativas para su uso en el aula. La rectora decía: "es que este espacio no lo puedo modificar porque a nivel de infraestructura no se puede hacer el arreglo pertinente según la norma establecida", entonces yo le daba*

*a ella, otras pautas u otras ideas, para que pudiéramos llegar a concretar en particular ese espacio que necesitábamos tanto en el aula y para el nivel” (Entrevista a Melody).*

The flexible way that the space is reconfigured stands out in this school. Educational experiences determine the elements and resources that occupy the space as it is filled with sense and meaning. While the classroom disposition with its tables and seats may be used to respond to a specific activity, this is not the permanent space array.

Teachers have also introduced important changes that are related to scheduling and planning. Collective planning performed by early education teachers is not a ‘strait-jacket.’ What is planned is not necessarily done; however, the intentions of the developed actions are not suppressed. Teachers are committed to finding a plan to meet children’s needs in a way that is neither rigid nor with unrelated, loose activities.

*Now we do it (planning) as a conceptual map, and it seems to be working; it is the most appropriate for them... we have restructured ourselves in many ways and many times this year. (Interview, Emilia).*

*Ahora lo hacemos (planificar) como un mapa conceptual, y parece estar funcionando; es lo más apropiado para ellos... nos hemos reestructurado de muchas maneras y muchas veces este año (Entrevista a Emilia).*

Sometimes the topic of planning is imposed by the institution and teachers reject it and propose alternatives that they deem more appropriate for them and for the children.

*We do have a planning, but not one that strangles the fun and opportunities for children to express themselves; when necessary, planning can also be abandoned, because there is no guarantee that it works. (Interview, Marcela).*

*Nosotros sí tenemos una planeación, pero no una planeación que estrangule la diversión y las posibilidades de los niños de expresarse, para nada, la idea es que la planeación se pueda abandonar también cuando sea necesario, porque es que no hay garantía que funcione. (Entrevista a Marcela).*

The planning that provides a step by step to achieve specific teaching and learning purposes does not help teachers like Marcela. For her and other ECE teachers, there are less linear and more enriching alternatives that allow them to select, organize, and propose activities, taking into account the needs of the students, the conditions of the classroom environment and the axes of pedagogical work. In short, there is a time and a school space that shape interactions and communication between those involved in ECE. In this way, the activities, routines, and practices with the children are permanently negotiated to respond to what the teacher considers to be their educational needs (Sorin, 2006).

### **Teachers’ creative adaptation**

The creative adaptation can be considered what Jeffrey and Craft (2004) call “Teaching creatively” as “using imaginative approaches to make learning more interesting and effective” (p. 79). Creative teaching implies that students take the initiative in their learning through the strategies deployed by the teacher, giving up control and encouraging innovative actions. Many teaching strategies contribute to this: exploration methods,



use of humor and empathy, participatory methods, and stimulation of the imagination, among others. For the teachers, in this study it involves creating alternative ways of doing what the school plans and organizes, without opposing or resisting, but rather adapting. The following record show how space is inhabited physically and symbolically by children, accepting its limitations but favoring their experience:

*You only need to enter the classroom to find that there is an intention in the arrangement of the elements: micro spaces inviting to read, to play, to represent, to move, to music appreciation and to senses delight. The space is dynamic and versatile; one day books, toys, a gym and a small theatre, a form of learning corners open to exploration throughout the day may be arranged; next day, the space disposition is transformed by adding a table with different objects. The generation of multiple exploration options encourages respect for diversity on children's rhythms and interests. (Field-Journal).*

*Basta con entrar al salón que ocupan habitualmente los niños y niñas para encontrar que hay una intencionalidad en la disposición de los elementos con que cuentan: microespacios que invitan a la lectura, al juego, la representación, el movimiento, la apreciación musical y el deleite de los sentidos. El espacio se transforma, es dinámico y versátil, un día pueden estar dispuestos libros, juguetes, un gimnasio, un teatrino, una forma de rincones pedagógicos abiertos a la exploración a lo largo de la jornada, otro día, a esta disposición se puede sumar una mesa con objetos vinculantes, que buscan incitar un recorrido por el conocimiento. Todo esto, posibilita el respeto por la diversidad en los intereses y ritmos de los niños y niñas, desde la generación de múltiples opciones de exploración que quedan abiertas (Diario de Campo).*

The creation of enriched environments for teacher–student interaction stimulates attention to the interests and needs of children and the appreciation of the different possibilities of knowledge that they carry and can build. On the other hand, the work of teachers around curriculum planning involves the work carried out by the school that preschool teachers adapt to include their initiatives.

*All the time we work transversally, and we have a quite consolidated curriculum grid; it is renewed in annual work-tables, according to the expectations and needs of the community. We are part of that large machinery gear, of the institution, we are, I might say, the pinions, the force that gives momentum to the rest of the institution including other grades. (Interview, Melody).*

*Total, todo el tiempo hacemos transversalidad, es, una malla curricular bastante consolidada, cada año hacemos unas mesas de trabajo donde vamos renovando, según las expectativas y las necesidades de la comunidad, ... este trabajo es conjunto, tiene que ver con toda a institución, somos parte de ese gran engranaje de la maquinaria, de la institución, somos, diría yo, los piñones, la fuerza que le da impulso al resto de la institución incluyendo a los demás grados. (Entrevista a Melody).*

According to Jeffrey and Craft (2004), innovation, ownership, control, and relevance are characteristics that were used in research in primary schools from 1990 that focused

on the creativity of the teacher and the nature of their creative teaching. Melody speaks of this creativity, regarding curricular planning.

**Teachers' authoring. Teacher making decisions and acting in their contexts**

In these public schools—where the program is implemented—in comparison with private schools, early educators face problems of precarious early socialization of children, because they are born and grow up in spaces of scarce social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993) compared to that possessed by other groups in society. This starting condition is transformed into a challenge by teachers, who are concerned with issues, such as participation, among others. They look for alternatives so that children's voices could be heard when they become participant agents in their learning process.

*I do not lecture; we do the class together. I'm frustrated if children do not participate, but if I do something and they get involved in the story I feel good, because they already proposed, and my leadership gradually lessens. (Interview, Maria).*

*Yo por lo menos no trabajo la clase magistral, para mí todos hacemos la clase, si los niños no participan, me siento frustrada, pero y si yo empiezo a actuar y a hacer algo loco con el tema que estamos viendo, y ellos se meten en el cuento, que chévere, ya me siento bien, porque ellos ya propusieron y yo voy como menguando mi liderazgo (Entrevista a María).*

As Maria affirms with regard to reading, her leadership gives ground to the participation of children in processes that actively involve them throughout the development of the planned activity, starting from the interaction with the educator. The observation of a teacher's day at work evidences the flow of activities, oriented toward instilling in the children a sense of participation and a relational way of looking at things. The teacher develops a sequence that become richer and deeper in accordance with their conceptions of child's development.

*All the children have arrived. As a welcoming ritual, they sit at their places...they begin with a dialogue about the day before by asking questions about what they liked the most and what they liked the least...Then, there's a reading: the teacher chooses a story—which I later found out was related to a dialogue previously held with the children—while they get ready to listen, without the teacher's instructions. The reading begins, some of the children ask questions, and always with an open attitude, she answers...the teacher manages to capture their attention through voice changes, gestures, and movements that complement the story...Once the reading is over, some space is given for reflection about the story: what they liked the most and what they found interesting. They leave the classroom for some physical activity...the teacher reorganizes the classroom space turning it into a gym. Before entering, they take off their shoes and grab a gym mat. First, relaxation, paced breathing, exercises that bring to mind the book that was read...and she asks them to imagine, while still lying down, how the story goes, and so, the story is retold based on what the children are saying. The memory of the places evoked helps them prepare the gym space...Once the gym is all set, the teacher enacts the movements of the characters in the story and invites the children to follow her lead. As she works on the gym, the teacher also works with the musical instruments (drum, triangle, tambourine,*

*maracas, and claves), associating them with the reading...At the end of the day, the teacher opens up a dialogue about what they have done during the day and what they have learned, with the reading as guiding thread of activities. (Field-Journal)*

*Todo ello se ve reflejado desde el inicio de la jornada cuando los recibe (a niños y niñas) en la puerta y los dirige al aula en donde se encuentran para realizar un saludo colectivo, como ritual de bienvenida todos se sientan en su silla...y comienzan a desarrollar un diálogo respecto a lo que hicieron el día anterior ...se indaga sobre lo que más les gustó y lo que menos les agradó...Usualmente se inicia con una lectura, la maestra toma un cuento que tenga que ver con algunas de las situaciones que se nombraron en el primer diálogo, para este momento las y los estudiantes se preparan, ... para realizar la lectura; es decir, la docente no tiene que dar la instrucción ...La lectura empieza, ...se van aclarando dudas y respondiendo preguntas que van surgiendo, la maestra siempre se mantiene en una actitud abierta...siempre escucha y da una respuesta...es todo un espectáculo pues la maestra logra captar su atención, interactuando con voces, gestos y movimientos que interpreta de acuerdo a la historia...Al finalizar la lectura la maestra realiza un espacio evaluativo -si se quiere mirar así- sobre la misma, para ello realiza preguntas por lo que más les gusto y o que encontraron interesante. Posterior a la lectura los niños y niñas salen a clase de Educación Física...la maestra reorganiza el espacio transformándolo en un gimnasio. Antes de entrar, se quitan los zapatos y entran a la colchoneta. Primero, relajación...respiración...ejercicios que despiertan la imaginación y la creatividad..., trae a la memoria el libro leído, las situaciones allí vividas, los personajes identificados, los sonidos realizados y...así reconstruye la misma a partir de lo que sus estudiantes van diciendo. Cuando comienzan a conversar sobre los lugares y como eran estos termina el diálogo e inicia otro momento, el gimnasio. Para instalarlo la maestra retoma lo que el grupo venia narrando respecto a los lugares de la historia y los asemeja con alguna parte del gimnasio; ...con cada lugar nombrado, una vez montado todo el gimnasio la maestra inicia el trabajo con movimientos indicándoles a sus estudiantes qué personaje son y retomando de la lectura lo que hacían para que las niñas y los niños puedan simularlos; en general este momento se enfoca en el trabajo corporal. Junto con el gimnasio la maestra trabaja los instrumentos musicales, ... tambor, triángulo, pandereta, maracas y clave...asociándolos con la lectura. Para terminar la jornada la maestra genera un espacio en el que dialogan sobre lo que hicieron durante el día, sobre lo aprendido y la lectura que resulta ser el hilo conductor de las actividades (Diario de Campo).*

This teacher created alternative ways of organizing activities, times, and spaces with meaning. Teachers use their intuition and their children's needs at every moment. This way of thinking and acting invites them to make decisions on a permanent basis, becoming protagonists of the educational process and responsible for the consequences that this entails in the school.

*When I talk about intertwining the situations that happen in the classroom, and pursuing that everything has a harmonious relationship, I do it from what I know, from my teacher background. I have no single answer to early childhood education, I think the only recipe is willingness, zest and love for what you do, and that's all.*

*(Interview, Silvia).*

*Cuando yo hablo de entretener las situaciones que suceden dentro del aula, y buscar que todo tenga una relación armónica, también lo hago con conocimiento de las teorías, de lo que yo sé, de mi bagaje como maestra, de lo que puedo poner, esa herramienta en la mano, para decir, “esto nos puede funcionar en este momento”, yo no tengo una respuesta única para educación inicial, pienso que la receta única es la disposición, el gusto y el amor por lo que se hace, es eso (Entrevista a Silvia).*

It means that teachers like Silvia freely assume to be themselves in the sociohistorical circumstances in which they act; they talk about themselves and are aware of the important role they play in children's development. Teachers' authoring can be recognized as the key resource through which teachers make sense of their work. The teachers make efforts to maintain and develop their professional identities.

### **Teachers creating new figured worlds**

The actions of teachers with preschool children have brought "winds of change" to the school, in the line of "another order," as one of the teachers names it. This new order is accompanied by changes that contravene the figured world, considered natural among those who live in the school. This figured world becomes natural in terms of the rites, actions, activities, rules, and practices that are situated spatially and temporally, that the actors involved understand and share (Urrieta, 2007). In this way, their lives within that world make sense because they are interpreted in the light of shared meanings (Holland et al., 1998). The characteristics of these new figured worlds created by preschool teachers can be expressed as follows:

#### ***The democratization of the relations established by the actors***

This democratic perspective opposes the trend that persists in most schools predominantly authoritarian, hierarchical, and homogeneous (Harber, 1995; Moss, 2021). The teachers' agency allows this "other order" to transform the conceptions of social relations and the ways to establish them.

*It is a 'different order': friendly and fostered among all. It does not require yelling and challenging looks. Undoubtedly, it teaches children how to build relationships of solidarity, with respect, recognition and acceptance of everyone. It is 'another order' that invites them to be there, autonomously, according to their interests. (Interview, Emilia).*

*Este "otro orden", diferenciado, amable y propiciado entre todos, es uno que no requiere gritos y miradas desafiantes, de manera profunda ello evidencia que los niños y niñas luego de esas relaciones pensadas de manera diversa, tienen un disfrute diferente por las dinámicas institucionales, haciendo uso de otros principios de autonomía relacionados con sus intereses (Entrevista a Emilia).*

In this same sense, a teacher proposes the teaching of sign language, as alternative, with the purpose of making the school inclusive, or at the least, to teach the children to understand each other from the difference as a valuable trait of democracy building.

*The teacher involves sign language as a method of inclusive education, for the stu-*

*dents to be prepared to interact with any person, in any condition whatsoever; she uses this language constantly throughout the day (Field-Journal).*

*La docente involucra el lenguaje de señas...como método de educación incluyente...considera que es una herramienta que le proporciona a los estudiantes con el fin de que estén preparados para interactuar con cualquier persona en cualquier condición; dicho lenguaje lo usa constantemente durante la jornada (Diario de Campo).*

The above records show the variety of strategies teachers put at the children's disposal in order to create democratizing spaces during learning, socializing, and the child development process. The ideas of participation as action imply a deeper consideration of agency in teachers and social actorship and open up alternative mechanisms of inclusion and the concomitant expansion of the concept of democracy in classrooms and schools.

### ***The recognition of the subject as the protagonist of the school activity***

Teachers seek to move from a focus on content to a focus on the subject who learns. In this way, the pedagogical approach and school activities are centered on the child and her interests. This movement alter the teacher–student power relationship and propose a new balance of school relations and the educational process.

*The richness of project-based work lies in the variety of possibilities that may be presented to children to enrich their learning process because it avoids routine, promotes curriculum integration, collective construction; it helps to adapt to time and place in which it develops, and allows recognizing the child as a subject of knowledge that fully develops. (Interview, Melody).*

*La riqueza del trabajo por proyectos está en la variedad de posibilidades que se le puede presentar a los niños y niñas para que enriquezcan su conocimiento pues evita la rutina, favorece la integración curricular, la construcción colectiva; permite adecuarse al tiempo y al lugar en el cual se desarrolla, y permite reconocer al niño como sujeto de saber que se desarrolla integralmente (Entrevista a Melody).*

This recognition of the children allows them to occupy a space that is warm, cheerful, lively, and, as opposed to other school spaces, a place where they can be happy. The education of children is potentiated when teachers understand that students learn more and develop better if their interests are used as basis of the educational activities and if they manage to understand the meaning of such activities.

### ***Participation as a resource for the construction of active subjects***

Early childhood teachers feel committed to a perspective that seeks the construction of new subjects. In this sense, participation is an indispensable mechanism for giving children a voice and thus contributing to their development as autonomous subjects. Teachers are open to change, in their interaction with children, in a sense contrary to what is reported in the literature in relation to the resistance they put up against it (Ball, 1989).

*...children express themselves; they feel comfortable and know that they are a legitimate other when they are heard and have time to talk about their cat, their mom, their aunt, or a trip to the pool. (Interview, Marcela).*

*El espacio de encuentro de dejarlos expresarse es sentirse cómodos en su lugar y saber que eres otro legítimo cuando se te escucha y tienen el tiempo de decir que yo puedo contar que mi gato, que es que mi mamá, que es que mi tía, que fui a la piscina (Entrevista a Marcela).*

For this teacher, children's participation is a priority for the pedagogical experience and she is willing to reinforce it in all the areas in which she works: play, literature, exploration and the artistic expression.

*In every experience with the children, the teacher makes sure that their voice is being heard. So, while the group is gathered around a series of abstract paintings, located at the centre of their circle, a simple question like "what do you think these images are about?" makes the children raise their hands immediately, asking to speak, while those who cannot restrain themselves start out brainstorming on what each image incites in them. (Field-Journal).*

*En cada experiencia con los niños y niñas, las maestras garantizan que su voz sea escuchada, así, mientras uno de los grupos se encuentra alrededor de una serie de pinturas abstractas ubicadas en el centro de su ronda, resulta cautivante apreciar cómo una pregunta sencilla: ¿de qué creen que serán estas imágenes? hace que las manos de los niños y niñas se levanten rápidamente pidiendo la palabra y algunos de ellos sin poder contenerse, empiecen a expresar la lluvia de ideas que cada imagen les suscita (Diario de Campo).*

The teacher in her process of continuous reflection generates more appropriate alternatives to promote child development that not only allow content learning but also propose renewed actions that benefit children on the way to construct themselves as active agents in the social world.

#### **Parental involvement in the school**

Through the incorporation of parents into school life, teachers break down the walls of the school. Parents maintain a permanent interaction with teachers, which is not a common feature within the public school. Parents' knowledge of children's schoolwork and their participation are essential to promote a meaningful development. Epstein's model recognizes the significant role of collaboration between teachers, parents, and community in promoting student development (Epstein, 1996). The work with the family demands that teachers explain to parents the meaning of their work, their purposes, and the need for them to understand that what is important is the well-being and development of their children.

*During a short meeting with some parents, Marcela manages to mitigate their anxiety by clearly saying: what is important is not that they come out reading and writing, but that they have enough tools to do so better and with more comprehension skills; that they leave with the basics. Do not expect them to come out reading and writing, like you might have. Your children also read their environment, they read others' feelings, and speak about themselves or their classmates clearly; and that is also a gain. (Field-Journal).*

*Durante una reunión con padres de familia Marcela intenta bajar la ansiedad que*



*les genera el proceso de lectoescritura diciendo que los niños, se llevan las herramientas, ellos se llevan las bases, pero que no esperen que salgan leyendo y escribiendo de manera convencional. Mire que es un niño muy hábil para leer el entorno y lo describe a la perfección, mire que el niño lee también los sentimientos del otro y te habla de sí mismo o del compañerito con claridad y eso también es una ganancia (Diario de Campo).*

In summary, preschool teachers, through the program that integrates children aged 3–4 into school, report that it has been possible to mobilize changes in school life. These teachers are giving shape and meaning to educational and school change and thus contributing to improving the lives of children in schools and in society.

A limitation of this study is that the teachers who participated in the process joined voluntarily and therefore had a good disposition toward the implementation of the ECE program. Given the great diversity of schools and teachers in a city like Bogotá, the question remains open as to what happens in those schools where there is resistance to the implementation of the policy. In this same sense, we focus on analyzing the possibilities rather than the difficulties. Therefore, future studies could focus on the difficulties in the implementation processes.

## Conclusions

The findings evidence that the forms of teacher agency give meaning to ECE actions and offer possibilities for the school to achieve its goal of including the 3- to 4-year-old children. This study derives knowledge from the experiences of teachers who created and implemented strategies that contribute to the development of children as autonomous, creative, and social subjects. We have examined the way teachers' agency promoted the creation of innovative and contextualized initial educational strategies. The practices of teachers evidence how early childhood educational institutions, through a meaningful implementation of an educational policy, become more responsive to children's particular needs and contexts. It was also noticeable that teachers' agency is associated with different ways of action in which they display their personal and social resources as they interact with school communities. The forms of agency included teachers positioning themselves within the implementation of the program by resisting, negotiating, and adapting creatively to respond to the children's needs and to the main objectives of the ECE policy to promote experiences of literature, the exploration of the environment, play, and art in order to achieve the integrated development of children.

Furthermore, teachers' experiences evidence that ECE is not just about teaching, but about socializing and fostering a learning culture in children. It is a new teaching possibility that does not mean repetitive writing exercises, or homework, or filling notebooks. It is not a spontaneous teaching, or a loose or random activity. On the contrary, ECE is an intentional process that considers the existing knowledge of children and the permanent support of teachers who are attentive to what happens in practice to reorient and improve it. It is an education that is renewed through teachers' agency and the recognition of children as social actors capable of participating in their development in different spheres of their lives and in different environments. For teachers it is essential to look at childhood experiences and the meaning they build in their daily lives. In the process of development of ECE, teachers have seen the need for mobilizing their peers, teachers

of other institutions, and parents in order to holistically influence child development. Cong-Lem (2021) states:

*Teacher agency is increasingly embraced as an important quality of teachers for making meaningful changes to their living and professional environment (Fu & Clarke, 2017; Nguyen & Bui, 2016), starting with their classroom teaching (van der Heijden et al., 2015). The importance of teacher agency lies in the fact that teachers have the capacity to agentively adopt, adapt or even resist newly implemented policies and programs (Severance, Penuel, Sumner & Leary, 2016), thereby determining the results of change efforts at institutional and national levels (Tao & Gao, 2017). (Cong-Lem, 2021, p. 718–719).*

The actions of the teachers contributed to the insertion of new perspectives of understanding children, teaching, learning and development that mobilized changes in the educational institution and in the school culture. Thus, the implementation of ECE in schools generated new interactions and meanings that became a platform for change that helped schools move from conceptions centered on teaching activities that organize teaching, to conceptions centered on the child and the promotion of its integral development of it; from a conception of learning based on silence, to a learning in which the voices of children have a privileged place; from authoritarian disciplinary dynamics to a participatory and flexible process of building norms that includes children and their families; and from a planning based on subjects and their sequencing, to a more flexible consideration of teaching that incorporates esthetic, affective, and playful dimensions and that also takes into account grade transitions and activities, times, and spaces that children experience.

In conclusion, all the characteristics of the concept of culture represent both platforms that offer possibilities and frameworks that restrict perspectives and are of "enormous importance for the understanding of the phenomena of education and socialization that take place in the school setting" (Pérez-Gómez, 1998 p. 16). In this sense, this study contributes to highlighting the possibilities of reflection and change for teachers in the process of implementing a policy that involves and commits them. Drawing on ethnographic data, we evidence the crucial role of ECE teachers' expertise in promoting their agency, and the process of policy implementation as a scenario of possibility to enhance the educational practice.

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#### **Author contributions**

All the authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by ALG and MC-A. The first draft of the manuscript was written by ALG and MC-A, and all the authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. Both the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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#### **Availability of data and materials**

The data used and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Declarations

### Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study approval was obtained from the ethics committee of Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

### Consent to participate

Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to the interview. All the identifying information was changed in this paper by changing the name of participants and institutions.

### Competing interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article. All the authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript. The authors have no financial or proprietary interests in any material discussed in this article.

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