



A look at the baby as an active subject in the daycare context: development, learning and teacher training

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Abstract

This work is part of a doctoral research project and aims to analyze the impacts of a training proposal aimed at teachers who work with babies, focusing on their perceptions of their own knowledge about integral child development, as well as their understanding of the contributions of contemporary research related to baby knowledge. Method: This is a qualitative, exploratory study carried out in four early childhood education schools in a city in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Eight education professionals (four pedagogical coordinators and four teachers) participated in the study, as well as 32 babies distributed in four nursery I classes. The methodological instruments used were: (1) a sociodemographic questionnaire and a questionnaire on professional experience with babies; (2) semi-structured interviews with professionals working in daycare centers; (3) non-participant observations in four nursery I classes in the respective schools; and (4) a focus group. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in full, while the observations were recorded in a field diary. Thirteen professionals participated in the training; and 12 professionals participated in the focus group. After the proposed training, previously addressed issues were revisited, with the aim of identifying possible changes in the participants' perceptions of babies. Data analysis followed the assumptions of content analysis, as outlined by Bardin. Results: The results addressed the teachers' perceptions of their own knowledge about babies, regarding developmental milestones, authors, and researchers on this topic, babies' knowledge and lack of knowledge, communication, and play. A positive impact was observed in the perception of professionals after the training, who described babies as more communicative, having a multimodal language and intentionality in their relationships with others and with objects. Conclusion: The study demonstrates a change in the way professionals view babies, which will impact on the relationship they establish with them, and the quality of the environment they offer in educational spaces. The relevance of training spaces for these professionals is highlighted, both in the scope of initial training and in the scope of ongoing training.

1. Introduction

In Brazil, daycare is considered an important stage in the development of babies, therefore, one would expect to find a certain balance in these spaces regarding practices related to children's learning and their neuropsychomotor development. However, there is an imbalance in this relationship, which prioritizes learning and comes not only from the training of Pedagogy professionals—which, culturally, tends to emphasize the teaching and learning processes—but also from the guidelines of documents, such as the National Curricular

Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI) and the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) [1], that support and reinforce the discourse of learning to the detriment of child development.

The Legal Framework for Early Childhood, Law 13,257/2016 [2], highlights the need to coordinate sectoral actions aimed at providing comprehensive care for children, with the aim of establishing principles and guidelines for the formulation and implementation of public policies for children during their first six years of life. In this sense, Gerhardt [3] emphasizes that focusing on the relationship between babies and their caregivers is a much more profitable way of investing in their mental health than subsequent adult therapeutic treatments. Even so, the author highlights the disconnection between government policies and the practices adopted in this area, making it difficult to prove that a significant part of this future expense could have been avoided with previous investments focused on the development of babies' emotional regulation, promoted through early relationships considered to be of quality.

For those who care for babies in educational settings, it is essential to know and stay up to date on their development, so that they are able to recognize the "expected" events of each stage. Thus, neuropsychomotor development is considered a process that encompasses cognitive and neurological aspects, as well as the development of language, motor development and the emotional development of the baby. In this sense, the Child Health Record describes and proposes the monitoring of the milestones of the integral development of babies and young children [4], and, as it should be distributed to all children, we could consider it an important instrument in monitoring and recognizing the ways in which each baby is developing.

Motor development involves thinking about a body-totality, which encompasses the baby's sensoriality and corporeality, since it is through corporeality that the baby expresses their agency in—and with—the world [5]. In these terms, Soares [6] presents the Emmi Pikler Institute's child development scale, which documents the baby's psychomotor and psychosocial development, and refers to what babies usually do for themselves, how they move in everyday life, which can support educators in moments of observation and serve as a basis for the construction of each baby's motor development. It is an instrument that presents each of the motor achievements and takes into account the postures and intermediate positions necessary for the acquisition of a new skill. In order for a baby to acquire the ability to walk by 18 months, it is necessary that they first achieve other motor skills, such as: muscular strength (development and maturation of muscles), head stability, mastery of movements, ability to sit and crawl, lateral walking with support and ability to stand. Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer [7] emphasize that for a baby to begin to move, their base must be firm and solid.

Parlato-Oliveira [8] emphasizes that babies are endowed with a language that allows them to interpret the environment, as well as express their needs and interests. Language is the tool for communicating with the world; a means we use to make ourselves understood, to be understood, and to express what we think and feel; since human beings are exposed to it since their intrauterine life [9]. As an extension, Golse and Amy [10] emphasize that "the baby does not enter language directly through the meaning of words, but through the music of language, and singularly through the language of its mother: its timbre, its intensity, its rhythm, its silences... through the prosody of her language", which we know as motherese. Research has highlighted the many skills that babies have, for example, they take turns speaking, are able to differentiate between two languages with different rhythms, and their vocalizations already present grammatical structures specific to the language in which they are inserted [8, 11].

The baby's emotional development begins even before they are born, from the moment they are planned (or not) by their future parents. Parlato-Oliveira [8] states that the baby has a psychic apparatus that allows them not only to perceive, but also to interpret and perform an action. Guerra [12], in turn, presents 12 indicators of intersubjectivity, which can be observed in the development process, starting with the meeting of gazes provided by body support, followed by proto-conversations and face-to-face play, the ability to imitate, tickle and suspense play, and attentional vocatives. Upon reaching the sixth indicator, displacement in space and referential gaze, there is an important change from the possibility of the baby sitting up and moving around by crawling. Then, the indicators of joint attention and tutor object, hide-and-seek games, affective attunement, interplay, signaling gesture and joint narrativity follow.

Regarding the perception of professionals who work with babies in educational institutions in relation to the baby's integral development and knowledge, studies are still scarce. There are studies that deal with proposals for intervention or evaluation of babies in daycare, with the proposal of interventions with the objective of evaluating and promoting improvements in motor development [13, 14], as well as investigating the influence of the quality of the daycare environment on this same aspect of development [15]. One of them addresses the

relationship between quality of life and neuropsychomotor development of babies who attend daycare [16].

The study by Albuquerque and Aquino [17] found a dissonance between the educators' statements and what development theorists and guiding documents for Early Childhood Education postulate, highlighting the relevance of continuing education that addresses child development and educator-child-environment interactions. Ramos [18] also emphasizes the need to develop integrated work, with a view to the child's comprehensive development, regardless of diagnosis. The author accentuates the role of the school as a space for promoting health and comprehensive development.

Regarding the work developed with babies in daycare centers, Valença and collaborators [19] sought to understand how the articulation between care and education occurs, and found that the teacher is responsible for planning and conducting the pedagogical process, while the assistant is in charge of care. However, divergences were identified in the concepts of care and education, difficulties related to the number of children per room, infrastructure problems and little or no time dedicated to professional training.

Such studies corroborate and highlight the idea that daycare is a potential space to promote the integral development of babies. Therefore, it is of fundamental relevance to research how much nursery teachers know about the integral development of babies, as well as how up-to-date they are on recent research regarding their knowledge, considering the baby as a subject that has a multimodal language and intentionality in establishing their relationships with others and with the world. Parlato-Oliveira [11] states that the way babies are seen by some professionals is not in line with what we currently know about them, since research has advanced in this field, but has not yet managed to reach those who care for babies.

Based on this, this work constitutes an excerpt from a doctoral research and aims to analyze the impacts of a training proposal aimed at teachers who work with babies, focusing on their perceptions of their own knowledge about integral child development, as well as their understanding of the contributions of contemporary research related to baby knowledge.

2. Method

This research is part of a qualitative or phenomenological paradigm, common to research developed in the field of applied human and social sciences [20, 21]. Considering the intentions and objectives of this article, this is an applied research with a mixed and descriptive approach, which also includes field research [22, 23]. Considering characteristics found in complementary studies that have babies as their object—and that involve at least two areas (Education and Health)—, we opted for action research in a context where the construction of each of the stages of the investigation is based on what is being researched with a view to a better understanding of reality.

Four Early Childhood Education Schools in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, which have a nursery and receive babies from 0 to 18 months of age, were selected as the research sites. Two of these are private schools and the other two are public schools, affiliated with the city government. The criteria for choosing the schools were based on convenience, based on recommendations and contact made by the researchers with the management teams.

The research participants are eight professionals who work in nurseries—four of them are pedagogical coordinators and four are teachers or assistant educators—and answered the questionnaire and participated in the semi-structured interview; and 13 professionals who work in nurseries who answered the questionnaire and participated in the training course. The focus group included 12 of these professionals. In addition, the research had 32 babies participating, considering the four nursery I classes. All had their participation authorized by the family.

The instruments used were: 1) a sociodemographic questionnaire and a questionnaire on experience of working with babies; 2) semi-structured interviews with professionals who work with babies in daycare centers; and 3) non-participant observations in four nursery classes in four schools. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed, and the observations were recorded in a field diary. The post-training discussion was recorded in a field diary by two research assistants.

The training offered was carried out in five four-hour meetings, and in the first two meetings the topics addressed were related to the baby, their development and their knowledge, through the following topics: 1) Language development; 2) Motor development; 3) Emotional development; 4) Baby knowledge; and 5) Baby play.

To analyze the data produced in the interviews, observations and focus groups, the Content Analysis (CA) method was used, following the assumptions of Bardin [24]. The choice of this resource arises from the need to understand the relationships established through the systematization and interpretation of the interactions of the research participants. CA aims to obtain the maximum amount of information, organizing it in the search for answers to the proposed problem [24].

This study was developed in full compliance with the ethical precepts set forth in Resolution No. 510/2016, which regulates ethical conduct in research in applied human and social sciences [25]. Consent protocols were used, through the Letter of Consent (Carta de Anuência), for the researcher to enter the schools, and the Free and Informed Consent Form (Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido), for teachers, pedagogical coordinators, parents or guardians, as a way of ensuring ethics and care during contact with the babies and professionals. Regarding ethical procedures, the project was submitted to the Plataforma Brasil and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (CEP/PUCRS), according to Opinion No. 6,336,666.

Throughout this paper, excerpts from the questionnaires, interviews, observations, and focus groups related to the proposed objective will be presented and problematized. For the purpose of identifying the participants in this investigation, the interviewees correspond to four pedagogical coordinators, identified as CP1, CP2, CP3 and CP4; and four teachers, identified as P1, P2, P3 and P4. The numbers correspond to the Participating School, and the nurseries observed and recorded in field diaries are identified as B1, B2, B3 and B4. Thus, for example, CP1, P1 and B1 correspond, respectively, to the pedagogical coordinator, the educator, and the nursery inserted in the universe of one of the schools—in this case, it is School 1. The field diary entries made by the research assistants are identified as AP (1 and 2).

3. Results and discussion

To answer the research question and to clarify the objective of this study, we will analyze the impact of a proposal for training infant educators on their perception of their own knowledge about integral development, as well as on current research on infant knowledge and what impact it has on the work they develop. In addition to thinking about the perception of the research participants and observing the way they see and relate to infants, it is necessary to observe, describe and discuss how infants relate to adults, recognizing their intentionality, communication, and activity in this process.

During the initial stage of data production, still in the questionnaire, questions about babies were asked to teachers and pedagogical coordinators. The first of these was about how they perceived their knowledge about babies and their development. Most participants (n=10) responded that they know and are able to identify developmental milestones, following recent research. On the other hand, some of these professionals (n=4) responded that they have an idea about developmental milestones, and only one responded that she does not (re)cognize them. In addition, one person marked more than one option in the answer, invalidating it [26].

Regarding the well-known authors on development, the most cited were Piaget, Vygotsky, Pikler and Reggio Emilia. In fact, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Pikler are recognized as pioneers in studies on development and babies, especially in the area of Education. However, Reggio Emilia would not be an author, but rather an Italian approach to thinking about Early Childhood Education. According to Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer [7], both Piaget and Vygotsky contributed significantly to the understanding of children's mental growth, since the former highlighted the biological changes that contribute to cognition and, the latter, how social interaction can transform thinking and problem-solving skills. However, the authors emphasize that, currently, these theories alone are not enough to explain cognitive development.

At the same time, it was noteworthy that one participant stated that she did not know any authors, and that three participants did not answer this question, leaving doubts about how familiar they were with the topic [26]. Contemporary authors and researchers on babies were rarely cited or not mentioned at all. Interest in babies and young children has grown in recent years, with emphasis on the works of Nagy and Molnab [27], Parlato-Oliveira [8, 11, 28], Golse [29], and Gratier and Lumbroso [30]. As mentioned previously, these are studies that address and discuss the knowledge and potential of babies. Studies and publications on development, from contemporary authors, allow us to rethink the way we relate to babies, and nurseries are the main environments—in addition to the family—in which they are inserted and tend to spend most of their day.

Next, the participants' beliefs were explored regarding what they believe the baby already knows and the things

they do not yet know. The responses considered that playing, crawling, and laughing refer to what babies know best, while talking, walking, and eating alone are registered as what they do not yet know. It is known that babies know much more than we imagine and, as research advances, it has been possible to measure what this knowledge is [8, 31]. Therefore, it is important to ask ourselves about this and create possibilities so that babies can “tell” us more about themselves. By reflecting on this, we are already placing ourselves differently in the relationship we establish with the baby.

Regarding how babies communicate, the participants’ responses were diverse, including communication through looks, facial expressions (e.g., smiling), body language (gestures, waving hands), crying, babbling, and even some words. Parlato-Oliveira [8] states that, to speak, babies are not restricted to oral language, which is still under construction; they use gestures, sounds, and body movements to demonstrate their interest or disinterest in an object or person. One of the participants highlighted the fact that social interaction helps in approaching and understanding communications.

The researcher emphasizes that, currently, we consider babies as interlocutors, with whom we must talk and, above all, listen to what they have to say [28]. The way we communicate with them is directly related to the image we build about their ability to understand and interpret the messages addressed to them. CP2 considers it essential to talk to the little ones, and mentions his concern, when hiring teachers, with the commitment that these professionals talk to the babies, recognizing in the conversation not only a means of communication, but also of comfort and acceptance [26].

Crying is also a meaningful form of expression, requiring attention in order to understand what is being signaled. Paying attention to the signs that accompany this vocalization is essential to interpreting their needs and emotions. During the observations, some babies cried more than others, and this crying was not always understood—in certain situations, it was also not welcomed. We believe that welcoming crying is essential, although this does not necessarily mean picking them up. Sometimes, talking, offering a toy or a cloth, or simply showing presence and availability may be enough.

Considering the importance of establishing bonds and the fact that children understand what is communicated to them, in all the classes we visited, we made a point of saying that we would be there with them, observing their daily lives. We responded to their expressions, let them know when we were about to leave, and said goodbye when we left. At times, however, we noticed that their expressions and gestures were not taken into account, or that certain actions were not explained to them. We would like to highlight the importance of verbalizing what is happening, anticipating actions, and maintaining a rhythm of speech that involves the other person. Musicality, tone, and communicative intention can foster harmony in the relationship. Reflecting on the multiple aspects involved in this process—language, movement, and emotion—allows us to understand the construction of intersubjectivity, as proposed by Guerra [12].

Although the participants in this research recognize the importance of dialogue with babies, it is clear that a culture that understands them as not very active or capable of understanding what others say persists. P1’s statement illustrates this perception: “I talk, a lot. Not them, of course. They don’t understand, they just laugh at me”, revealing the need for constant updating of knowledge about the forms of language in early childhood [26]. Assuming that the baby does not understand limits the moments of interaction throughout the routine, restricting the potential that these communicative encounters have, as exemplified by P4, who mentions interactions mainly in moments when she needs to say no to something or change diapers.

According to Souza and Weiss [32], adults accustomed to spoken language may have difficulty understanding other forms of expression and communication, which, in the case of babies, are manifested through looks, cries, touches, gestures, smiles, and babbling. The authors emphasize that, most of the time, professionals who work with this age group are unable to perceive complex communicative signals [32]. Speaking in a soft or melodious tone tends to be better received by babies, and it is ideal for the adult to get physically close and use the body as a means of expression, going beyond words.

Playful experiences in early childhood were also addressed in the interviews: whether babies play, how this activity takes place and whether professionals participate in these interactions. It was possible to perceive different understandings, which varied between the recognition of playing as something central and valued, and the possibility of disregarding playful manifestations, interactions, and communication. The starting point here is the conception that babies play, and their first “playful object” is their own body—especially their hands. In the first months, external toys still do not occupy a predominant place in the play experience.

Exploration is understood as a fundamental part of these actions, even though it sometimes goes unnoticed—especially when we fail to recognize certain behaviors as investigative. In this sense, it is possible to think of the baby as a scientist of things, who (re)constructs their own ways of being, perceiving, and relating to the world [33].

Another relevant aspect concerns the materials available. If we consider curiosity as a defining characteristic of this stage, everything that is offered in the environment can acquire playful potential, becoming an element of discovery and interaction. In this sense, the way we understand play—and the objects involved in this activity—can influence our understanding of babies' play, even leading us to think that babies are not playing when they do not pick up or show interest in the toy.

In addition to the environment and objects, it is crucial that adults are available for play and participate in it at times. According to P3, “they play with a little bit of everything, right? Because they are very fast, but there, if we sit down and play, they get really involved” [26]. Golse [29] refers to three necessary conditions for the baby's relational play: malleability, narrativity and the otherness of the other, which implies the presence of someone available for interaction.

Music was present at different moments of the observations and can function as a form of connection and communication with babies. According to Parizzi and Rodrigues [34], early musical learning has the power to promote full development, acting both in the enhancement of skills and in the attenuation of motor, cognitive or emotional limitations. The use of music also provided body movement and the discovery of rhythms from musical experiences that allowed the baby to collect, explore and expand the sound repertoire of their culture, creating memories of “sounds, pitches, rhythms, timbres, harmonies, textures, expressive characters, forms of organization, among others” [34].

Batista [33] states that the baby's play space is a privileged area, as it favors the performance of “tasks that constitute the subject.” The author adds that the creative baby is an “experimenter, manipulator, analyst, and creator.” During the observations, it was possible to notice that babies tend to constantly interact with each other, with the teachers and with the researcher, through different ways—exploring the environment, manipulating objects and expressing curiosity. The interaction with the researcher, when entering the rooms for the first time, occurred mainly through attentive looks: some accompanied by smiles, others with hand gestures. Each one approached in their own way, while some just observed from a distance.

By observing the interactions and explorations, it was also clear that babies were intentional in the relationships they established with others and with the environment, as well as their ability for multimodal communication. In this sense, the way they relate to each other changes as they conquer space, expand their movements, or acquire knowledge about a certain object or person.

The way one baby interacted with the teachers demonstrated the bond and intimacy established between them, indicating that the teachers occupy a different place from the one occupied by the researcher. More playful moments of interaction were observed: “she started playing with two of them a game of tickling, music and hands, to which the others approached to play too. She tickled them and one of them tickled her too” (Field Diary, 12/07/2023, B3). This scene highlights the importance of the relationship of trust and closeness with the adult, as pointed out by Guerra [12], when he states that the tickling game is about reliability and suspense, since we do not play tickling with someone we are just getting to know. Suspense, according to the author, “implies a ‘preparation’ for waiting and for tolerating the uncertainty of what will come, which makes the unexpected less insecure or persecutory.”

Moments of greater interaction and exploration by the babies could be observed when the room was organized in such a way that materials and toys were within their reach, and the teachers monitored and guided the explorations that each one carried out with these elements and in different spaces. This fact stresses the importance of the teacher's role, including in organizing the environment, so that the pedagogical proposal is also executed in this prior preparation. The entire exploration process, in addition to favoring development, already includes several learning experiences [26].

After the training, in a focus group format, two questions that had been asked in the initial survey questionnaire were asked again in order to analyze whether there had been a change in the participants' perception. Three points were most frequently mentioned regarding what babies know: communicating, playing and interacting. In this topic, the word playing appeared both before and after the training. On the other hand, the inclusion of the words

interacting and communicating may demonstrate a change in the participants' perspective, as they began to understand how active the baby is in relation to their development. In addition, the participants considered that they had been able to deepen their perspective even further after the course. In this way, they emphasized the adult's role in knowing the baby, observing them, and treating them with affection and care.

Regarding what the baby does not yet know, two things stood out: writing and verbalizing, in contrast to the words mentioned in the first moment of the research: talking, walking, and eating alone. Here, once again, it was possible to see how much the view regarding the baby's communication has changed. In this topic, the participants took longer to answer: "regarding this topic, the participants found it difficult to write, because, after the course, they realized that the baby knows many things, that it is even difficult to write what he does not know" (Field Diary, 04/11/2024, AP1). Therefore, it is possible that they began to understand that the baby knows much more than they previously believed.

Regarding the change in the way they listen to and observe babies, the groups accentuated the opportunity they had to be more theoretically grounded, in order to qualify their perceptions of everyday life, as well as their actions and care for babies, expanding their perspective of care to a more attentive and investigative one. Furthermore, in order to think about the proposals and experiences of everyday life, they stated that they understood the importance of respecting the baby's rhythm and the possibility of "giving up" the traditional way of working, thus being able to reduce the number of activities. Barbosa and Richter [35] state that babies teach us other ways of feeling, perceiving, and acting in the world, as long as we are present, observing, trying to make sense of their communications and responding to them.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the data produced in this research revealed that participants perceive the baby as a protagonist—yet not always as a subject who communicates about themselves, interprets our actions and the world around them, and understands what is communicated to them. At times, it is acknowledged that the baby communicates, but we are not prepared to listen or to consider their intentions.

From the proposed training, a significant change was noted in the way of looking at babies, as they began to be understood as having knowledge and language, who understand what we communicate to them and who communicate about themselves. This change will certainly be reflected in the daily lives and practices of each of the participants and, consequently, will contribute to greater participation by babies in the construction of this space intended for them. Therefore, recognizing and considering these babies positions those who interact with them in a place of uncertainty, which is often uncomfortable and causes distress, not because the baby cannot communicate, but because the adult cannot understand what the baby is communicating.

In addition to a specific training proposal, such as the one offered, it is necessary to think about how to ensure that this knowledge and this space for exchange are offered to students and professionals who work with babies on a daily basis. This can happen in several ways: from its inclusion in undergraduate curriculum to the creation of public policies that guarantee spaces for ongoing training.

5. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

6. Reference

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