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Promoting equity in an early years context: the role of participatory educational teams

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ABSTRACT: This article presents an alternative participatory pedagogy in Early Years as a contribution to the promotion of equity and social justice for children, particularly those from ethnic minorities and low income families, enhancing their chances of educational success. The development of mass education was implemented in many countries by centralised educational systems through curricular uniformity that assumed cultural homogeneity. The increase of cultural diversity in current societies and schools make this bureaucratic assumption grossly inadequate for educating children in a school for all. To counteract this strategy, the Childhood Association, supported by the Aga Khan Foundation, has been developing a participatory pedagogy in Early Years alternative contexts, entitled *Pedagogy-in-Participation*. This article presents the development of participatory professional teams within this pedagogical perspective as a means to promoting equity and social justice. The initiative requires substantial investment in building up the capacity of the entire workforce to work with all type of diversities, including ethnic and socioeconomic diversity.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article présente une pédagogie participative alternative pour l'accueil et l'éducation de enfance en tant que contribution à la promotion de l'équité et de la justice sociale pour tous les enfants, en particulier ceux des minorités culturelles et des familles vivant en précarité afin d'améliorer leurs chances de réussite éducative. Le développement de l'éducation de tous a été mis en œuvre dans de nombreux pays par des systèmes éducatifs centralisés à travers un curriculum national uniforme sous l'hypothèse d'une homogénéité culturelle. L'augmentation accentuée de la diversité culturelle dans nos sociétés et écoles actuelles rend cette hypothèse improbable pour l'éducation des enfants dans une école pour tous. Pour contrer cette stratégie d'homogenisation, la Childhood Association, soutenu par la Fondation Aga Khan, a développé une pédagogie participative – *Pédagogie-en-Participation* – pour l'éducation de des jenes enfants dans des contextes alternatifs. Cet article présente le développement des équipes professionnelles participatives comme un moyen de promouvoir l'équité et la justice sociale. Des investissements importants sont nécessaires pour développer la capacité des professionnels à travailler avec tous les types de diversité, notamment avec les diversités ethniques et socio-économiques.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Dieser Artikel stellt ein alternatives Konzept einer partizipativen Elementarpädagogik dar, das Gleichheit und soziale Gerechtigkeit für alle Kinder fördern und insbesondere die Bildungschancen von Kindern aus

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ethnischen Minderheiten und aus Familien mit geringen Einkommen verbessern soll. Die Entwicklung des allgemeinen Schulwesens hatte in vielen Ländern zentralisierte Schulsysteme mit einheitlichen Lehrplänen zur Folge, denen die Annahme kultureller Homogenität zugrundelag. Die zunehmende kulturelle Vielfalt in den heutigen Gesellschaften und Schulen machte diese bürokratische Strategie ungeeignet für die Erziehung der Kinder in einer Schule für alle. Um dieser Strategie entgegenzutreten, hat die portugiesische „Childhood Association“ mit Unterstützung der Aga Khan Foundation eine partizipativen Elementarpädagogik entwickelt – Pedagogy-in-Participation. In diesem Artikel wird als ein Bestandteil dieser pädagogischen Perspektive die Entwicklung von partizipativen professionellen Teams dargestellt. Dies erfordert erhebliche Investitionen in den Aufbau der Kompetenzen aller betroffenen Fachleute zum Umgang mit Diversität, einschließlich ethnischer und sozioökonomischer Vielfalt.

RESUMEN: En este artículo se presenta una pedagogía participativa alternativa en educación infantil (de infancia) como contribución a la promoción de la equidad y de la justicia social para todos los niños, en particular los de las minorías étnicas y de familias de bajos ingresos, como la intención de mejorar sus posibilidades de éxito educativo. El desarrollo de la educación de masas se llevó a cabo en muchos países con sistemas educativos centralizados a través de la uniformidad curricular asumiéndose una homogeneidad cultural. El creciente aumento de la diversidad cultural en las sociedades y las escuelas actuales hace esta estrategia curricular burocrática completamente inadecuada para la educación de los niños en una escuela para todos. Para contrarrestar esta estrategia la Childhood Association, con el apoyo de la Fundación Aga Khan, ha desarrollado una pedagogía participativa en Educación de Infancia en contextos alternativos – *Pedagogía-in-Participación*. En este artículo se presenta el desarrollo de los equipos profesionales participativos como un medio para promover la equidad y la justicia social. Esto requiere una inversión sustancial en la construcción de la capacidad de los profesionales para trabajar con todo tipo de diversidades, entre otras las diversidades étnicas y socioeconómicas.

Keywords: quality in early childhood education and care; participatory pedagogies; participatory educational teams; Pedagogy-in-Participation; cooperative team building

1. Cultural diversity of Mass schools and the persistence of pedagogical uniformity

1.1. Cultural diversity of mass schools and curricular uniformity

The universal character of schooling induced not only quantitative but also important qualitative transformations. Quantitative changes come from the increase in the number of students, teachers and school units; qualitative transformations come from the cultural diversity of students and local communities where schools are integrated.

Children from different geographic origins (rural, urban, suburban and inner-city populations), from different socioeconomic groups backgrounds (working class, middle class, immigrant workers), from different ethnic origins (from the ethnic majority and from ethnic minorities) compose the cultural diverse population of mass schools.

This social diversity encompasses an academic diversity since the newly arrived to compulsory schooling come from families not aware of the monolithic values, norms and motivations of formal education. This cultural diversity is often looked on by the school as a problematic academic heterogeneity since it breaks the traditional social homogeneity of the selective schools.

In centralised countries, the first answer to this social diversity and consequent educational diversity in basic schools was the normative enforcement of curricular and pedagogic uniformity, assuming that extending traditional school education to all was the ‘natural’ answer.

To teach the same content to all children at the same time in the same mode is seen not only as the most rational mode but also the embodiment of educational equality of opportunities. This was a blend of the ideological concept of equality seen as uniformity to all, and the centralised bureaucratic tradition of governing the educational system. This blend of bureaucratic reason and ‘egalitarian’ values is embodied in a conception of *equality with uniformity* – equality of opportunities means the same to all.

This led to a ‘bureaucratic pedagogy’ at both classroom pedagogy and curriculum management level – uniformity in classroom practice was induced by strong normative control on all details of school management and also on curriculum and pedagogical solutions planned for the ‘average able student’ taught by the ‘average teacher’ in ‘average schools’. This ‘average able student’ was the medium able, knowledgeable and motivated student. This curriculum remained uniform for all students and schools, regardless of previous learning experiences, of diverse capacities and motivations, of different interests and expectations. This ‘ready to wear, single size curriculum’ (Formosinho 2007) induced the same hours of lecturing, the same syllabus, in the same teaching units, all determined by norms at central level.

1.2. Curricular uniformity and the bureaucratic mode

In many countries, the State has developed a bureaucratic model for the performance of its ‘educational mission’ and conceived a unique way of ensuring the universality of education and, hence, of defining an *optimum pedagogy* which is set out in a school curriculum. When defining this curriculum, the central educational administration determines in uniform fashion for all the national territory and for all students *what* they should learn and, hence, what should be taught, while explicitly or implicitly assuming basic options as regards educational conceptions and purposes. The definition of the curricular *corpus* is integrated into a conception of the school as a social place for formal education and social control, which has lent it legitimacy during the course of modernity and made it into an ideological apparatus of the State. At the same time, it incorporates conceptions and guidelines about the mode of structuring and materialising the curriculum as regards contents, methodologies and assessment.

The centralised bureaucratic model for formulating the curriculum cultivates uniformity and revolves around an abstract average student. The role of each subject in the curriculum, his or her weekly workload and the programmatic contents are defined at a higher level. General methodological guidelines are formulated, with the purpose of teaching the best methods and techniques for transmitting the pre-defined curriculum contents in presumably uniform settings.

In this bureaucratic model, the *image of the child* is that of the ‘tabula rasa’, the blank sheet, and his/her activity is to memorise contents and reproduce them faithfully, to discriminate in response to external stimuli, to avoid mistakes and correct those which have not been avoided. The *image of the teacher* is that of a transmitter who will typically use structured materials for knowledge transmission – manuals, worksheets, workbooks. The child’s motivation is based on extrinsic reinforcements,

usually from the teacher (Oliveira-Formosinho and Formosinho 2012). This bureaucratic mode is *blind to cultural differences* which explains why the majority of teachers are often blind to ethnic differences believing that children are also blind when confronted by colour or other social and cultural differences (Formosinho and Machado 2012; Oliveira-Formosinho and Araújo 2011). In recent years, there has been a progressive integration of Early Years within this bureaucratic mode. As Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho (2008b) explain:

Mainstream pedagogical practice in State preschools is becoming each time more influenced by the combined convergent impact of all these factors. They promote a pedagogical, professional and organisational culture in State preschools; encouraging the consolidation of a transmissive pedagogy and a bureaucratic practise influenced by primary school practice. This can be indicated by the introduction of bureaucratic formatted templates (planning models, curriculum projects, class registers, performance objectives, etc.), by the systematic reliance on commercial worksheets and activity books as the basis for daily activities.

This mainstream pedagogy also devalues participatory planning based on the encounter with children. It ignores professional purposes, promoting instead planning based on transmissive principles. This progressive immersion of state preschools in the bureaucratic climate of basic and secondary education makes more important to deconstruct the above referred 'natural' answer to social and educational diversity in basic schools. This answer needs to be deconstructed and the underlying processes need to go through a 'conscientisation' process (Freire 1970). The alternative is the development of participatory pedagogies as rights approaches (Pascal and Bertram 2009) in which children and professionals are seen as constantly developing their relational identities and having the right to participation in their learning journeys.

2. Pedagogy-in-participation: a participatory educational alternative for early years

The case study which will be presented was carried out in the context of Pedagogy-in-Participation (Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho 2008a; Oliveira-Formosinho and Formosinho 2012), the pedagogical perspective of the Childhood Association¹ This is a socio-constructive participatory pedagogy for early childhood education; it is a rights based approach under development since the early 1990s and is used in several early childhood centres in Portugal.

2.1. Enabling the child and the group to co-construct their own learning

In recent decades, educational research has emphasised child competence in all areas of learning. Pedagogy-in-Participation creates pedagogical environments in which interactions and relationships sustain joint activities and projects, enabling the child and the group to *co-construct their own learning* and celebrate their achievements (Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho 2008a). The immersion in this pedagogical context aims at creating a climate (both material and relational) for cultivating democracy, identities, humanity and knowledge, where children will feel respected, valued, included and answered, irrespective of their individual differences and even because of them. One of the contributions to equity and social justice that participatory pedagogy

brings is the involvement of every child and group in the co-construction of their own learning journeys. Participatory pedagogues support children in their learning and in learning how to learn, open with them the doors to knowledge and to the power of knowledge.

2.2. Substantial investment in early years education

It is known that quality early childhood education can yield high beneficial and lasting effects (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2011; Sylva et al. 2010) and so alleviate some consequences of poverty among early years children. However, the building up of the capacity of the workforce to work with all types of diversities requires substantial investment (Bennett 2013) if we want to achieve the level of quality that allows the integration and inclusion of children from diverse groups. Quality and equity are two sides of the same coin (Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho 2008a).

This specific research investigated the role of empowered educational teams in carrying out education for all in the context of an early years programme that seeks to ensure equal access and availability to children from ethnic minorities and low income families. A further aim was to develop an intense, situated workforce development strategy. Among other structural changes achieved, it also created an adequate adult–children ratio for the task, going beyond the legal requirements, namely providing three educators (one early childhood teacher and two educational assistants) to each group of children.

The improvement of the adult–children ratio per se is not enough for quality development. With this in mind, Pedagogy-in-Participation invested also in creating cooperative educational teams. Instead of favouring the traditional division of classroom labour limiting the contribution of the teacher assistants to care tasks (feeding, hygiene, supervising outside playing, etc.), the assistants were involved in the understanding of the pedagogical approach in order to build up a truly cooperating educational team in each classroom. To achieve this, a dense programme of context based, situated professional development for all was developed. There was also a policy of recruitment of members of staff from ethnic minorities – 25% of the educational assistants come from cultural minorities.

2.3. Substantial investment in staff learning journeys – adults as cooperative learners

To create cooperative educational teams requires a strong programme of context based, in action, professional development for all staff. Teachers and educational assistants are both considered to have the right to develop their learners' identity and have support for that. In the perspective adopted, *context-based professional education* is considered the privileged process for reconstructing the pedagogy, which presupposes a dialogue between professional development, pedagogical praxis and research.

Professional education processes are centred on practices. They depart from the collective identification of needs and purposes and proceed to the co-construction of professional education processes that make possible pedagogical transformation. In this sense, knowledge that is relevant for this practice is valued, considering that changes in practice are the vehicle that allows for the development of professional learning identities. There is evidence that pedagogical experimentation that evolve within cycles of action and reflection bring about change and innovation and can contribute to

knowledge development if conducted as a praxeological research approach (Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho 2012; Pascal and Bertram 2012).

The roles of children and adults (both learners) in Pedagogy-in-Participation are based on the re-conceptualisation of the person as a learner (the child and the professional). Both possess competence and agency, both own ability and taste for collaboration, both have the right to participate and to develop meaning during their learning journeys (Oliveira-Formosinho and Araújo 2004).

3. Methodology of the research

This article presents part of the report on a study that took place in 2013 at an Early Childhood Centre which is part of the *Early Childhood Development Programme*² promoted in Portugal by the Aga Khan Foundation and the Childhood Association.

3.1. *A praxeological research on participatory educational teams*

This research focuses on the role of participatory pedagogical teams (early childhood teachers³ and educational assistants) in an early childhood centre that adopts Pedagogy-in-Participation as its explicit pedagogical perspective. It follows an intervention lasting four years that promoted the situated learning of the educational assistants using *context-based professional education*. The educational assistants were supported in their professional development by the respective early childhood teacher and by the pedagogical supervisor of the centre. The research is praxeological, centred on investigating praxis (Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho, 2008c). By this is meant investigating practice that is grounded and reasoned, situated and contextualised – a practice infused with beliefs and values, based on educational theories and situated in specific contexts. The research was carried through with people seen as participants and not just as research objects. It implied the immersion of the researchers into the context for prolonged periods of time, marked by intensive and prolonged interactions with the participants within this context.

The research methodology followed the ethical principles of anonymity (all names used here are pseudonyms), the absence of deceit, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, respect for and trust in the participants. All the participants were given the opportunity to refuse or agree to participate (EECERA 2014).

3.2. *Objectives of the research*

The contribution for equity and social justice (Lloyd 2008; Moss 2008; Penn 2011) of this participatory pedagogy comes from various sources, one being involving all the learners (children and adults) in the co-construction of their own learning, exerting their rights and competencies, another being the process of empowering all the actors with well being, as a right per se and a basis for learning.

This specific research intends to investigate the role of empowered educational teams in the development of quality and equity in early years, as they are considered two sides of the same coin. The main objective of this research is to understand what it means to be a team in this particular context and to evaluate the quality of the educators' and the assistants' pedagogical mediation regarding each other and the children (their interaction as a team and with the children). It is also an important objective to study the consistency of

their professional action, especially in regard to the image of the child, the image of the adult and the role of situated, in context, learners' identities development.

3.3. *Context of the research*

The early childhood centre involved has 220 children and 60 members of staff – 10 early childhood teachers, 18 educational assistants, administrative, cleaning and maintenance staff. Teachers are graduate professionals; educational assistants have basic or secondary education qualifications.

The centre has 10 activity rooms, six for children attending the crèche (children from four months to three years of age) and four for preschool (children from four to six years of age). Children from low income families represent 58% of the centre's population (being 33% from very low and 25% from low income families); children from ethnic minorities represent 15% of the total

3.4. *Trustworthiness and credibility of the research*

In praxeological research, the person of the researcher is the main instrument of research. For this reason, the researcher's declaration of beliefs, commitments and interests is also an essential ethical principle in research. The researcher should assert her/his beliefs, make explicit his/her commitments and declare her/his interests (Formosinho and Oliveira Formosinho 2012; Pascal and Bertram 2012).

Being the authors involved in the Programme, it is important to clarify the means used to guarantee the trustworthiness and credibility of the research. The trustworthiness of a research is based on the way in which the study has been conducted at four levels: first, on the confidence one can have in the truth of the findings (credibility), second the degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings are shaped by the respondents and not by the researchers' bias (confirmability), third the consistency of the findings (dependability), fourth the usefulness of the findings for other contexts (transferability). The present study has taken into account these requirements for the quality of the research and its ethical location.

The credibility of the study (confidence that the phenomena under scrutiny are being recorded) has been achieved through steering the research using several means:

- The choice to use Laevers' engagement scale (Laevers 1994; Laevers and Heylen 2003) – extensively used in Europe for the analysis of pedagogical mediation – means the incorporation of adequate operational measures for the phenomena under scrutiny;
- Familiarity with the pedagogical culture of the early childhood context where research is taking place, due to involvement in the intervention and thorough documentary analysis;
- The fact that all participants were given the opportunity to refuse to participate gives some assurance about the honesty of the information that they provided;
- The fact that the research was conducted with the total group, thus avoiding the problems of purposive sampling;
- Triangulation of techniques regarding each educational team (observation, interviews, photos, documents) compensating for the limitations of each technique and making possible to check out specific pieces of information across all the participants.

Another important indicator of the credibility of the research was the frequent debriefing sessions that took place between the authors of this study and the pedagogical supervisor of the centre. Likewise, the accessibility of the data and regular communication of the research results to the informants and to other researchers have been important criteria of research credibility.

3.5. Techniques used

The methodology of this praxeological case study was conducted through structured observation using the adult's engagement scale (Laevers 1994), ethnographic type observation, field notes taken during observations, the communication of photos and interviews to all early childhood teachers and educational assistants involved. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face in the centre and recorded with the informants' permission for future transcription. They were analysed and categorised using content analysis techniques (Bardin 2009). The congruence of the research findings were supported and validated through triangulating information gathered from various instruments, e.g. interviews and field notes from observations and from various informants, e.g. through comparing the perceptions of early years teachers and educational assistants (Denzin and Lincoln 2000).

4. The role of participatory educational teams

4.1. Quality interactions of the educational teams

We identified, through the engagement scale, high and very high *levels of engagement* across three well established dimensions of pedagogical mediation (empathy, autonomy and stimulation) employed by the early childhood teachers and the educational assistants, thus confirming Pinazza's study (Pinazza 2012). Interactions with children were highly sensitive, granted autonomy and provided stimulation. Children and adults together focused on playing and learning, attuned to each other and the task. This suggests that the image of the child as a competent learner and a child with rights present at the level of thinking was also respected in action. In fact, the empirical evidence showing a high level of congruence between the image of the child in thinking and in action was massive. This information was extracted from the triangulation of data collected through a multi-methodic approach: an observation scale, ethnographic field notes and interviews.

4.2. Acknowledging children's competence – the interaction of educational assistants with children at reception time

To analyse the interaction of educational assistants with children, field observation was considered the most important source of data, since direct observation of practice is considered more reliable than self-reported descriptions. The reception period (from 8:00 to 9:00 a.m. in the reception room) for which the educational assistants were mainly responsible was seen as good moment to observe their interaction with children. This observation evidenced coherence and consistency in the interaction of assistants with children and in some cases with parents. There is evidence also of the same high quality pedagogical mediation in terms of sensitivity, stimulation and autonomy

as seen within the activity rooms. For instance, Yin, a little boy aged three who was returning from a period of more than one month of vacation in China, was experiencing some difficulty in integration. His father accompanied him to the room and a warm relationship with the assistants was evident. For a few days, Yin received special attention from the assistant Raquel and also from the other assistants in the reception room. Yin was soon integrated and showed well-being and participation. His feelings and emotions had been empathically respected.

Other field notes from ethnographic type observations provide evidence of the respect for the child's competence in action and the fostering of conditions that allow the child to exert competence and be autonomous:

M, a baby aged 15 months (she is the eldest of the group), when going out to the garden with the group decides to carry her little friend R (11 months, who still can't walk) on the small wooden trolley they usually use to carry puppets and other toys. She is allowed to do it while refusing any help unless crossing doors. It is a relatively long way that she overcomes with effort but also with visible determination and fulfilment. Her motivation is reinforced along the way by the adults present who praise her together with her friends when all arrive at the destination. (Field Note)

Field notes were triangulated with interviews to the educational assistants of the various classrooms (*crèche* and preschool).

One educational assistant (*Encarnação*) presented her perception of a group of babies (10 months to 16 months) smiling, as a very good indicator of children's well being and adults' sensitivity.

They still cannot speak but they communicate smiling and when they run (those who can already walk) towards us. When we were listening and watching together the opera [movie] they knew we were there and their first reaction while paying attention to the images and sounds was to stick on us kissing us and sharing their emotions. They express themselves that way. It was very rewarding.

Her mother says that in the morning she wants to come to school, she has that smile. When she arrives she keeps smiling. Her well-being is permanent and that means a lot of things because she feels safe, comfortable, it's real well-being, even by the end of the day when they are leaving. Seeing the child so well is the reason why we feel so good.

I had some difficulties at the beginning, everything was so new but after these four years I realise that it is essential to let the child observe and explore as they can and do it in fact. And they look at us because they know that we are waiting for something, through looking [eye contact]. There is this chemistry and they go on touching, moving, exploring by themselves while looking at us keeping in touch communicating with us. I do like to work this way.

Children's achievements are the best stimulation for adults, as Assistant Lia, in a preschool group, asserts:

I feel delighted with the children's achievements in this pedagogy. At the beginning I had some difficulties till the moment I understood that we shouldn't do things for them, they can do it by themselves, our task being to talk to them, helping them. And then I learned with Educator Mariana how to do it.

The high quality of sensitive pedagogical mediation, shown by educators and assistants sensitive was illustrated in the systematic respect, attention, affection, and support

they offered children as well as their encouragement and positive stimulation of children's initiatives. Responsive support to children's participation – through listening to and looking at them and the staff's investment in understanding and interpreting their signs and feelings – created a favourable educational environment for the development of learning and well-being. Other observations confirm that, in other care situations, staff remained conscious of the importance of sensitive interactions with children, for example, during meal times.

4.3. *The building up of a cooperating team – the voice of early childhood teachers*

All 10 early childhood teachers, with no exception, view themselves and act as team leaders assuming responsibility for the creation of favourable learning environments both with children and the assistants. All evidenced a commitment towards the empowerment of the team in coherence with the values, principles, beliefs and praxeological orientations of Pedagogy-in-Participation.

Our roles in the team are now clear, different but complementary. They know their tasks and mine and understand that in this way we can act like a team. (Fernanda)

The teacher Lucília further explains:

In the team the educator's leadership relates to her scientific professional expertise, the assistants' role being to collaborate in the development of the pedagogical dimensions [...] I plan with the assistants, they participate [also] in the organisation of the spaces and in every moment of the daily routine. When I'm with one group of children they work with the others so I rely on the feedback they give me to plan and organise better next time. The assistants also give their opinion concerning pedagogical materials for instance, if the children remain interested in exploring them or if it is time to substitute them. (Lucília)

The early childhood teacher Mariana confirms:

As we work with an explicit pedagogical perspective [...] they need to progressively understand it, to construct it in companionship with me and the children. That's why it is important to be a team. When the assistant has a different experience, for instance having worked in a transmissive pedagogy context, it is more difficult as we have to 'reconstruct' their attitudes and action with the children.

The early childhood teachers value the continuity of the pedagogical work that such a cooperating team can provide, as it is reiterated by all the teachers:

I expect that there is coherence in the work with the children even when I'm not present. We work on that. (Gabriela)

I expect that the work we develop together in everyday practice, including the reflection on that practice, enables them to interact with the children in continuity and coherence in every moment of the daily routine, even when I'm not there. (Sara)

The educational assistants participate intensively in every moment of daily routine. I pass them the message that they can do it and that they have an active role in the education of those children, that they are not merely carers. (Sofia)

It is important that the educational assistants are recognised explicitly as members of a cooperating team. As an early childhood teacher (Fernanda) said:

It is so important that the educational assistants feel recognised. It encourages them to keep open, motivated to learning. We are so involved in everyday action that we often forget [...] to tell them explicitly how valuable their participation and involvement in the team is.

Although they demonstrate in many ways that they feel it, it is important to tell them explicitly that in the same way as for educators there is a commitment with their own development and valorisation. Although they demonstrate in many ways that they feel it, it is important to tell them explicitly and that, like educators, they should be committed to their own development and valorisation.

4.4. The building up of a cooperating team – the voice of educational assistants

The interviews with educational assistants corroborate their self-image as members of an educational team and makes them feel prepared and empowered to assume their responsibilities. As an educational assistant remarked:

I feel my opinion counts. We talk about the planning and the educator always asks us ‘What do you think? Is this a good idea? Do you agree to make this?’ There is a very good communication, we can talk about everything. When she is not present we seek to follow the same orientation in the other routine moments. The teacher wants us to participate always in the general meetings with parents and I think that strengthens the team. (Matilde)

Another educational assistant (Lia) confirms:

I have learned a lot about Pedagogy-in-Participation since I started working here namely listening to the child, respecting his/her opinion, participating in the daily routine. I may say that I had a good teacher. The teacher always took the time to sit with me and explain things to me. For instance another aspect difficult for me was to identify and orient the reflection moment (when working in small groups with the children). I had learned to do it observing how she did it and I could ask some questions to the children but I was feeling that there was something missing, that I needed to learn more. She made a training session on that particular issue [...] She also gave me a book on this particular issue. Now I may say that I feel more secure [...] She has an intention in everything she does, there is an intention in the planning of every activity and over the time I got to understand it.

The assistants are conscious of the importance of pedagogical documentation and express it on a number of occasions. As confirmed by observation and interviews they deeply value the ‘child portfolio’ that is constructed by the educators, the children and the families. A main reason they mention is the importance for the child and family of having documented evidence of his/her learning journey, but also because they feel themselves as participants in that journey. They see documentation also as the demonstration of what has been achieved by all of them: children, teachers, assistants and parents.

As the educational assistant Cristina confirms:

This is a quite demanding pedagogy and we can attain our goal provided we work as a team. For instance, when working in the small groups with children the educator

cannot be with all of them at the same time. The same is true for documentation when someone has to be photographing and writing down what the children say when the educator is working with them. This is a crucial issue for teamwork.

Another expression of success that emerges both in the reflections and actions of educators and assistants is that they value equally care, playing and learning activities as meaningful educational experiences and, for this reason, they keep acting in coherence with the principles and values of the pedagogical approach. In Pedagogy-in-Participation, they are listened to and their opinions are taken into account in the organisation of the learning environment.

They are listened to and their opinions are taken into account in the organisation of the learning environment, including the pedagogical materials but also concerning their perception of the children's preferences, purposes and achievements that are taken into consideration in planning the activities.

As Raquel, an educational assistant working in the crèche section says:

What pleases me more is the interaction with the children. I cannot imagine myself working in a pedagogy that doesn't give me this freedom to give autonomy to children. I worked in a different pedagogy before and there it was the adult who determined everything. This pedagogy gives me the opportunity to watch the child discovering by herself. We participate a lot. We participate in the same way the children do it. Now I feel secure to work in this pedagogy.

Through triangulating the data from the interviews of educational assistants and early childhood teachers with field observations, one can better understand the continuity and coherence of the assistants' action when they are alone with the children and how they maintain pedagogical mediation throughout the day. There is congruence between the positive image of the child indicated in the interviews and the observed pedagogical action, an action that creates empathic space and time for child's use of competence and participation. This triangulation also indicates that there is an internalised praxis of participation, either in care activities or in learning activities, which is essential for the sustainability of the quality of the education and care provided.

4.5. *The building up of a cooperating team through a systematic learning process*

The systematic learning process of the educational assistants in regard to team building through observation, reflection, participation, in the framework of teachers' praxeological approach, impregnates their practice. This represents a process of empowerment which enables them to assume a higher level of responsibility with children and also with parents.

This systematic learning process comes from situated daily professional development through the cooperation within the classroom team; it comes from the *habitus* of discussing and sharing the monitoring of daily activities; it comes also from moments of formal training. All this evolves from a dialogue around an explicit pedagogy, nurtured by constant search for a congruent praxis.

As the educational assistant Ana Catarina explains:

Since I started working here there has always been training sessions concerning Pedagogy-in-Participation over the year, together with the everyday reflection and the

regular meetings with the educator where we also deal with the dimensions of the pedagogy. The training in a larger group with the other teachers and educational assistants is [also] very interesting, as they bring an opportunity to experience sharing.

My training happens every day in my day-to-day activity. I observe and ask when I need to clarify some aspects. This is really training. I also like to read, I read a lot. I'm also a mother and that helps.

Early childhood teachers and educational assistants alike, as professional learners, focus on the creation of pedagogical environments in which interactions and relationships sustain joint activities and projects, thus enabling children and adults alike to co-construct their own learning and celebrate their achievements (Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho 2008a).

5. Conclusion

This study first describes some structural measures to ensure accessibility to quality early childhood education for children in disadvantaged life situations. It then researches some process measures such as the building up of participatory educational teams as a means to achieving the child's right to quality education. Such teams (including assistants) develop more effective pedagogical and interactive skills and are more likely to reach out, in a spirit of equity and social justice, to disadvantaged children and families. In addition, participatory pedagogy and the involvement of every child in the co-construction of her own learning journey is a powerful motivator and an important contribution to overcoming passivity in the face of adversity.

In sum, the building of participatory educational teams may be critical for policy development vis-à-vis children from disadvantaged groups. The initiative requires substantial investment in order to build up the capacity of staff to work with all type of diversities, including ethnic and socio-economic diversity. In Pedagogy-in-Participation, the voices of the educational assistants, which are so rarely heard, become a source of inspiration in meeting this challenge, because they speak of the educational rights of children in fusion with their own. This may well be a place of complexity but it is also a place of hope.

Notes

1. Childhood Association has been supported since its creation by the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) Portugal. Childhood Association develops intervention, training and research aiming at the improvement of the education of young children. Since the early 1990s, has developed a pedagogical perspective, *Pedagogy-in-Participation*, as a socio-constructive participatory pedagogy for early childhood education.
2. The Early Childhood Development (ECD) Program was launched in 2008 based on a partnership between the AKF Portugal and Childhood Association to create an experiential center and to support a network of affiliate early childhood centers to provide participative practices, with a particular emphasis on multicultural awareness and intercultural pedagogy. The pedagogical perspective that has been developed over the years by Childhood Association with AKF support is called *Pedagogy-in-Participation* and encompasses professional and organizational development, intervention and research.
3. The use of the expression *early childhood teacher* does not convey any connotation with a transmissive pedagogy, but rather the need to clarify when we are presenting the voice of a graduate professional or the voice of an educational assistant, since this is important for the understanding of the intervention and for the triangulation of data.

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