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**Disputes around Assessments in Early Childhood Education
in Brazil**

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Abstract: The debate around standardized assessments became a global agenda imposed by multilateral organizations. These tests, in the neoliberal context, impose an impoverishment of the curriculum and also strong control over the teaching work. On the other hand, it also causes resistance from social movements. This paper addresses this process of disputes for hegemony in

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the context of early childhood education in Brazil within the last few years. This research analyses the protagonism of the Inter-Forum Movement of Early Childhood Education in Brazil (MIEIB) in the context of the Workers' Party administrations (Lula and Dilma). During this period, the movement had an amicable relationship with the federal administrations, which opened discussions about different ways to evaluate educational quality, based on the discourse of the right to education. Currently, this democratic dialogue no longer exists and the relations between the movement and the federal administration has become antagonistic, as the Bolsonaro administration wishes extend tests to early childhood education.

Keywords: standard assessment; hegemony; early childhood education; educational policy

Disputas en torno a las evaluaciones en la educación infantil en Brasil

Resumen: El debate sobre las evaluaciones estandarizadas se ha convertido en una agenda global impuesta por los organismos multilaterales. Estas pruebas, en el contexto neoliberal, imponen el empobrecimiento del currículo y aún el fuerte control del trabajo docente. Por otro lado, también provoca resistencias de los movimientos sociales. Este artículo aborda ese proceso de disputas por la hegemonía en el contexto de la Educación Infantil en Brasil (en los últimos años). La investigación analiza el protagonismo del Movimiento Inter-Foro de Educación Infantil en Brasil (MIEIB) en el contexto de los gobiernos del Partido de los Trabajadores (Lula y Dilma). En ese período, el movimiento tuvo una relación de agonismo con la gestión federal que permitió discutir sobre diferentes formas de evaluar la calidad, a partir del discurso del derecho a la educación. Actualmente, este diálogo democrático no existe más y la relación entre el movimiento y el gobierno ha convertido en antagonismo. Además, la gestión de Bolsonaro quiere imponer los testes para la educación infantil.

Palabras-clave: evaluación estándar; hegemonía; educación de la primera infancia; política educativa

Disputas em torno das avaliações na educação infantil no Brasil

Resumo: O debate das avaliações padronizadas tornou-se uma agenda global imposta pelas organizações multilaterais. Essas provas, no contexto do neoliberal, impõem o empobrecimento do currículo e ainda o forte controle do trabalho docente. Por outro lado, também causa resistência por parte dos movimentos sociais. Este artigo aborda esse processo de disputas por hegemonia no contexto da Educação Infantil no Brasil (nos últimos anos). A pesquisa analisa o protagonismo do Movimento Inter-Fóruns de Educação Infantil no Brasil (MIEIB) no contexto dos governos do Partido dos Trabalhadores (Lula e Dilma). Nesse período, o movimento teve uma relação de agonismo com a gestão federal que permitiu discutir sobre diferentes formas de avaliar da qualidade, a partir do discurso do direito à educação. Atualmente, esse diálogo democrático se acabou e a relação entre o movimento e o governo se tornou antagonista. E a gestão de Bolsonaro deseja impor as avaliações para educação infantil.

Palavras-chave: avaliação padrão; hegemonia; educação infantil; política educacional

Disputes around Assessments in Early Childhood Education in Brazil

Starting in the 1980s, the field of educational assessment was attacked by the logic of the search for “results” and competition, performance, as evaluated by Stephen Ball (2011). This change takes place in the context of the creation of management mechanisms that try to control the teaching work and build international indicators that disregard inequalities between countries (and within countries themselves). Gradually, standardized assessments took over the political scene and were naturalized as a hegemonic discourse that attracts left-wing and right-wing governments (Verger et al., 2019).

Within the scope of early childhood education, this debate is more recent and differs from those which emerge in other stages of education. This is partly so because of the historical trajectory of this public service, which still struggles for recognition in the educational field, and partly because of the specificities of the pedagogical work with young children defended by social and academic movements in the area.

This paper presents our considerations on the disputes around the conceptions of early childhood educational assessment that have been fought by the Inter-Forum Movement of Early Childhood Education in Brazil (MIEIB), based on the concept of “hegemony” of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. From this theoretical perspective, the MIEIB is regarded as an articulatory practice around a central (or nodal) point, which is the *defense of young children’s right to education*. Within the Brazilian national context, it has been a protagonist in the scenario of fights for this right, which fights also entail disputes for the meanings assigned to policies.

We will present a part of the research developed by Karla Almeida (2019) as well as the co-authors. For the methodology, we used documental analysis – whose source was the documents available on the movement’s website, interviews with leaders, and observations as participants (in events promoted by the movement). This observation was possible because one of the co-authors has been participating in this movement for more than 10 years.

The paper is organized into three sections: the first seeks the political context in which the MIEIB emerged; the second presents the Inter-Forum Movement of Early Childhood Education in Brazil and the third presents the political game for the construction of an assessment policy for Early Childhood Education. Thus, throughout the paper, the aim is to also present the explanatory potential of the notion of articulatory practice and hegemony developed by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and associates. Therefore, we resorted to the processes of antagonism and dislocation, as aids to understanding the incompleteness of social meanings in two political moments in the recent history of Brazil.

The Fights for Rights in Recent Brazil

The fight for the right to education in Brazil has its roots in what is called Pioneers’ Education Movement, which arose in the 1920s, composed of intellectuals that denounced that education was a “privilege”, as it was restricted to the middle and high classes (Teixeira, 1994). This pattern is a heritage of how the State was constituted during the colonization process, excluding the society, above all, the poor and enslaved population (Quijano, 2005). In this process, history is full of examples of resistance fights against this established power (Gohn, 2010).

Throughout its history, Brazil went through several moments of dictatorships, evidencing a fragile democracy and a weak notion of rights and Republican State “model”. Fights for public services for poor populations living on the outskirts of large cities also occurred during the period of military dictatorship (1964-1988). These disputes were at the heart of the fight for the return to democracy, which arose from the articulation between left-wing militants and progressive Christian

churches (under the Liberation Theology). A field referred to as “popular movements” was coordinated around the fights for social rights in a field of dispute that antagonized the dictatorship and the privileges of the conservative elites (Doimo, 1993).

The return to the (institutional) democracy in Brazil, different from other countries, was marked by a “conciliation” that prevented torturers from being punished but opened loopholes for a new Constitution. This fact is important because it has effects on the current government of a president who even defended torture and was elected with a speech of antagonism to the movements that he calls “communists” and enemies, in a context of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2018) – to resume this political scenario. It reflects what Evelina Dagnino (2000) and Paulo Martins (2003) will translate as government authoritarianism that became social authoritarianism.

These disputes influenced the “text” of the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988, which is considered by social movements as a milestone in this fight, because it includes, in its wording, many of the movements’ demands, based on the discourse of the need to ensure rights as provided by law (they saw the importance of the inscription in the law). Based on the logic of hegemony, we can notice that the ruling elites maintained their dominance by yielding to the pressure of the movements for social issues. The process was much more complex than what we can explain in this article, so we want to highlight the importance of social fights for the inclusion of rights.

A common articulatory practice was the creation of forums, which was the name given to an articulatory practice that aggregated the fight for a specific social right (education, housing, etc.). And, in most cases, they were composed of academic and professional associations, popular movements, non-governmental organizations, and unions. Throughout the constituent process, the forums became the main political actors pressing to ensure the inclusion of rights in the wording of the laws. The forums acted in the parliament as pressure groups and, to that end, they drew up proposals and also organized mobilizations. They represented the gathering of fighting experience and specialized technical advice.

This process was contradictory because there was a dispute among interests from different classes. This contradiction already came from the transition from dictatorship to democracy, with no punishment to the military and with many agreements and alliances. The movements made concessions to obtain minimum gains. The final text is the result of fights and losses. Additionally, immediately after its approval, the Constitution was attacked by the ruling elites, who were not satisfied that the discourse of social rights was a legitimate part of the government’s constitution. Since our days, these elites act according to a colonial logic, an authoritarian logic (Dagnino, 2000; Telles, 2000) that excludes the majority of society from the range of rights. It means that the inclusion of the rights in the “text” did not mean its immediate implementation in practice.

After approval of the Constitution, not all forums survived. Those who remained continued to act on public policy councils to ensure constitutional rights. The Right to Education Forum is an example of an articulation that played an important role in the Constituent Assembly to ensure some improvements in the wording of the Constitution but later fell apart.¹

This brief historical allusion is important because the Constitution of 1988 becomes the reference for social movements and left-wing parties, which, in most cases, are focused on fighting for rights, especially after the emblematic fall of the Berlin Wall. Moreover, this explanation becomes important because our study is focused on a movement that identifies itself as integration of forums.

Based on other research about social movements, we found that the fight for rights became the central point of articulation of several subjects, as a transcendental horizon (Laclau, 2006)

¹ Also, after the 2016 coup against President Dilma, the Popular Education Forum was resumed.

replacing the discourse of Socialism or Communism (Rodrigues, 2009). This fight starts to be deemed the horizon of what is possible, i.e., of the possible fights given the correlation of forces that was arising, in which the Welfare State was also questioned by neoliberal theories.

In this trajectory, the 1990s were marked by the deepening of neoliberal reforms (Gentili, 2009) and the mobilizations of social movements (many of them in forums). The government should be minimal only for social policies but it continued to favor the elites (upon direct or indirect transfer of public funds). Brazil reached the end of the 1990s with massive social inequality and rights still to be contemplated. Although the access to education had already been expanded, the contradictions were still much more evident, as in most Latin American countries (Gentili, 2009).

Articulations, Discourse, and Meanings: The MIEIB as a Political and Epistemic Actor

It was in this neoliberal context, during the administration of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, that the Inter-Forum Movement of Early Childhood Education in Brazil (MIEIB) emerged in 1999. It follows the same logic of the previous forums, even 10 years later. The MIEIB is an articulation between intellectuals and the popular movement for daycare facilities. Over these years, it has had a trajectory of fights and, at the same time, it has produced knowledge about childhoods, which is based on research and experiences. In its practices, it gathers agents from the State offices of education, non-governmental organizations, and intellectuals (in general, professors and researchers from public institutions). The milestone of its institutionalization occurred in the “meeting held during the event of the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research on Education (Anped) in Caxambu, Minas Gerais, in 1999” (Almeida & Rodrigues, 2020, p. 3).

The MIEIB, as a political subject, can be defined as a social movement (Dagnino, 2000; Gohn, 1991, 2005) and an articulatory practice (Laclau, 2011). This dialogue is possible due to the theoretical approximations and their implications in the political game. Laclau (2011) explains that articulatory practice implies that elements can be articulated as specific moments within particular discourses in the struggle for hegemony. It occurs when certain nodal points (points of captions) emerge within dominant discourses as privileged signifiers. They are poorly sedimented and exclude other discourses.

In the case of MIEIB, it emerges from the nodal point “social struggle for early childhood education as a right”. It emerges in a context that this discourse was not being acknowledged from the educational perspective. The policies only recognized Primary and Secondary Education.

In this trajectory, the MIEIB has become the protagonist in the fight for the “caring” for children to go from a social assistance discourse to the acknowledgment of the right to education. This discursive field was initially based on the women’s fights for daycare facilities. In its trajectory, it has acted in the building of policies from the extensive academic production of its members.

The movement is organized as a network of networks, i.e., it “consists of independent bodies of inter-institutional and nonpartisan coordination” (Arelaro & Maudonnet, 2017) formed by forums in the states that together compose the MIEIB. There is a national coordination group that articulates collective actions. In the organization, there are coordination groups in the states (of the federation) that support the activities. In their organization, there are national, regional, and local meetings to discuss the topics of the national agenda of Early Childhood Education (Almeida & Rodrigues, 2020, p. 6).

Thus, the MIEIB is fostered by a heterogeneity that includes public and private early childhood education teachers, coordinators and heads of educational institutions, researchers,

governmental bodies, boards of education, public agents (from legal, health, social assistance areas), NGOs, communities, unions, among others (Almeida, 2019; Almeida & Rodrigues, 2020).

The articulatory practice understood as partial fixation or dislocation of a system of differences (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015) helps us to realize that the transition from “elements” to “moments” is never fixed, but open to rearticulation. In this regard, while building a policy, in this case, for the assessment of early childhood education, several actors promote the articulatory practice. It is a moment in which political actors put aside their differences and regroup themselves around a central point – a signifier common to all; despite being a common link (Laclau, 2011), meanings are antagonistically disputed and reflect ambiguities and dislocations.

In this perspective, the discourse in its text format is conceived as the set of propositions that allow political actors to communicate their concepts, worldviews, precariously and contingently sedimented, in a context of relations of power that are crossed by articulatory practices and hegemony, which represents the peculiar process required from relations of power in the production of the discourse that will compose the policy text, i.e., it designates an operation that seeks to present a unique interpretation as if it were universal, constituted as necessary and inexorable. In this context, one of the identities/demands will occupy this place of representation of a broader political project. This operation uses operators that naturalize themselves in a common sense through several convincing processes that conceal their unique nature (Laclau, 1990).

The empty signifiers operate in the scope of the logics of difference and equivalence, start to represent a particularity operating hegemonically on differences aiming at universal sedimentation, even if contingent. That said, it indicates that meanings are made through representations and positions in the act, i.e., from the tension of the relation homogeneity/heterogeneity that moves between differences and equivalence, spectra of multiple senses that produce hybridizations.

Nevertheless, the hegemonic process bears within itself a set of discursive practices, rites, and rituals, modes of being and doing that constitute it, but that also has fissures, which we understand as loopholes for dispute. Therefore, due to its incompleteness, it allows other groups to find therein conditions for the production of a new discourse. Thus, at the edges of the discourse structure, at its identification failures, the possibilities of disputes regarding the fixation of meanings, which will be hegemonic, emerge (Laclau, 2013).

In this political scenario, the MIEIB emerged from the articulation around the struggle to include young children as subjects of rights in educational policies. In its trajectory, it has been a political actor, in the sense proposed by Laclau and Mouffe (2015), with social and epistemic nature. It has been articulating the creation of a discourse that also announces new educational prospects and concepts that have been translating themselves into school policies and practices in the scope of formal education, as highlighted in the paper by Almeida (2019).

The meanings that prevail in the policies are linked to the assumptions of neoliberalism (Laclau, 2013), have been propagated by international organizations, and gain materiality in the production of normative documents guiding assessment prospects for primary and secondary education. Among them, concepts and indicators are also developed for early childhood education.

This construction process was pressured by resistance, allowing the MIEIB to propose and reframe policies. We can consider that the performance is comparable to what Gramsci proposes with respect to organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1995). In this regard, they act as formulators (by developing studies and researches) and disseminate these concepts within state forums (Almeida & Rodrigues, 2020).

In this movement, there is a fixation of meanings that is contingent, subject to questioning and changes. The deconstruction process involves exposing the contradictions that have been sedimented. This is how the MIEIB builds counter-arguments to the dominant discourse (Almeida & Rodrigues, 2020). Its discourse is built on academic production, scientific rationality that makes it

an epistemic subject. The actions of its organic intellectuals combine militancy, theory, and knowledge production, carrying out research that is shared within the movement.

Throughout the government of Fernando Henrique, there was a fragile dialogue between the movement and the Ministry of Education. Documents were created, but no concrete policy was implemented because there were no specific funds for early childhood education. There was an antagonistic position most of the time, due to the denial of this stage in the policies.

There was a positive change in the period from the second Lula government (in 2007) to the coup suffered by Dilma Rousseff (in 2016). In this period, a leader of the MIEIB takes over the National Coordination Office for Policies for Early Childhood Education under the Ministry of Education. Thus, the relationship between the MIEIB and the government became agonistic, as defined by Mouffe (2005). This relationship may be considered the construction of discursive semi-consensus that generated significant changes in education, curriculum, and assessment policies, with effective allocation of the public budget. It was the first time in the history of politics that early childhood education was considered as a stage of education with the right to public funding, including for the construction of buildings in partnership with municipal administrations. For instance, approximately 10,385 early childhood education schools were built between 2007 and 2016 (Almeida, 2019). The action of building these types of schools is new in the history of Brazilian education. And, after that year, the program was interrupted (until now).

The MIEIB was present in different contexts of the textual production of policies in which meanings were disputed with other political actors, especially those from dominant classes (educational business groups) - which also have their articulatory practices to influence policies and space also in Workers' Party governments. Under these administrations, there was a perspective that accepted the possibility of alliances with the ruling classes in order to build semi-consensus in a democratic way. The government also maintained its macroeconomic policy, even though it was a period of a significant increase in the public budget for social policies. This position was widely criticized by left-wing Marxist intellectuals as an illusion and contradiction perspective that was even used to co-opt social movements (Druck, 2006; Oliveira, 2006; Paulani, 2003). This position was even defended by MIEIB militants who were interviewed in the research.

Thus, the policies are understood as part of these articulations in relationships of hegemony, as a partial fixation of meanings that express themselves in official documents (Southwell, 2008).

Due to its capillarity in the country, the MIEIB was also able to help in the diffusion of national guidelines in the context of management of cities; in this path, it influenced the micropolitics, the day-to-day practice by early childhood education professionals. That occurred because public managers participate in activities developed by the movement, which, among other actions, is concerned about holding educational events and meetings to discuss policies, the concept of childhood, and pedagogical practices. It is possible to mention the initiative by the Ministry of Education of contracting (individual) consulting services to hold courses and monitor the implementation of policies in the states – they often counted on the help of the MIEIB to develop their activities, or even on the participation of its militants as teachers.

In this context of disputed meanings, the MIEIB, as already mentioned, works in coordination with other political actors, a strategy that exhibits the hegemonic marks for conquering space and legitimacy, as pointed out by Laclau (2013). In this regard, it has managed to expand the grammar of meanings in these articulation spaces, which was possible by means of what Laclau (2011) calls *floating signifiers*.

This process can be noticed more effectively in the discourses advocated by the MIEIB (concept of child and childhood) being included in the official policies and documents and being sedimented in the practices of teachers throughout the country, in a broader institutional perception

as the movement gains ground inside the Coordination Office for Early Childhood Education (COEDI) under the Ministry of Education (MEC).

Disputes, Articulations, and Meanings: Assessment of and in Early Childhood Education

In this context, we will highlight the definitions built in the articulation processes (Laclau, 2015) and disputes within the scope of assessment policies for Early Childhood Education in Brazil. For the scope of this text, we will analyze the last governments by the Workers' Party (PT), with Lula and Dilma (2003-2016). These governments were characterized by the wide participation of social movements, but also of business groups.

In this political scenario, the MIEIB contributed to preserving meanings that would be "consistent with the concepts of child and childhood and with the purposes of this stage of the Brazilian primary and secondary education" (Didonet, 2014, p. 1), according to the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law ([Law 9,394/96] Brasil, 1996). It was in this relation that the MIEIB contributed to formulating the National Guidelines for Early Childhood Education of 2009 (Brasil, 2009).

In this period, the MIEIB often acted as a hegemonic actor, due to the articulations established with other social and academic agents (the National Early Childhood Network, the National Campaign for the Right to Education, the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research on Education, public universities, among others). However, this does not mean that such a moment of articulation occurred without antagonisms.

Thus, the Brazilian legislation (National Education Guidelines and Bases Law No. 9,394/96) provided for assessment in early childhood education, but it did not define the concept. Hence, it became an object of dispute. There was a classification and behaviorist conception and, on the other hand, an attitude that preserved observation and registration of child development based on its own "experience", focusing on mediation (Didonet, 2014), defended by the MIEIB. This dispute persists in the construction of assessment policies because it is related to the different conceptions of early childhood education (Rosemberg, 2013).

The first or the behaviorist conception, according to Didonet (2014), is based on the idea that education is directly related to who does it. There are contents specifics and intentionally in educating children in their first years of life. According to this conception, it is possible to measure the achievement of the child.

In the second, it is linked to the pedagogical processes that see the child as the subject and co-author of their development. It is based on the experiences and the importance of the interaction and the plays, the games. In this way, the schools can stimulate the relations among the children and their autonomy. This differentiation allows us to identify the antagonistic processes in which the MIEIB disputed the meanings.

The proposal of multilateral organizations, despite recognizing the child as a subject of rights, focuses on a perspective that places early childhood education as a strategy to fight poverty and the teaching service, developed in the first years of primary and lower secondary education, in which the assessment logic is based on results that can be measured.

The concept of assessment advocated by the MIEIB is related to the context, the infrastructural conditions of the buildings, the materials available, the work conditions provided to the professional. This perspective is present in several documents and its propositions are in the document called *National Quality Parameters for Early Childhood Education* (Vols. I and II; Brasil, 2009). This text established the minimum architectural and institutional standards that are linked to a

conception. It is a concept that aims to ensure the right to education and tries to establish minimum standards in terms of funding, available places, teacher education, and curriculum.

Its vision is documented in the National Early Childhood Education Policy: the rights to education of children between 0 to 6 years old (Brasil, 2006). A connection of meanings is being built between the signifiers *assessment* and *quality*, they begin to participate in the same chain of meaning that permeates macro dimensions of policies, also influencing pedagogical proposals consistent with a full perspective of education.

In 2009, the MIEIB was present when the text of the *Quality Indicators in Early Childhood Education* was built – a self-assessment instrument to support the discussion about assessment based on the problematization of access indicators. These improvements in the discourses and meanings that obtained articulatory legitimacy show progress in the understanding of the assessment of and in early childhood education. Moro (2017) considers this assessment perspective as formative, of the participatory and dialogical type, as it involves different agents that are internal and external to the educational institution.

However, in 2011, the Office for Strategic Affairs of the Presidency of the Republic – SAE prepared a proposal for the creation of early childhood care policies, containing an assessment of child development in daycare facilities, inspired by the North American instrument called *Ages & Stages Questionnaires, Third Edition (ASQ-3)*:

is a developmental screening tool that pinpoints developmental progress in children between the ages of one month to 5 ½ years. Its success lies in its parent-centric approach and inherent ease-of-use—a combination that has made it the most widely used developmental screener across the globe.²

This proposal is based on a standard, universal concept of development - positivist conception. It proposes an assessment composed of 30 questions and 21 scales with 620 items, on the development of children in early childhood education and is divided into five blocks (personal-social, communication, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, and problem-solving), based on a linear concept of development. A true culture of tests, which inverts the structure, replacing “the ends with the means”, and which confuses diagnosis and assessment (Didonet, 2014). Therefore, in this regard, it is conceived as a screening tool that diagnoses developmental disorders to refer children to specialized areas.

Thus, the proposal (ASQ-3) is vehemently criticized by the MIEIB - an antagonist position. This position has been the reason for several notes in that year (2011). The notes are contrary to the adoption of any type of large-scale assessment policies of children’s performance. For the MIEIB, the assessment must “be articulated with the National Quality Parameters” (Vitória-Espírito Santo Letter, 2012, p. 1). In this sense, child development only must be assessed based on each child itself (there is not a universal child, but a singular subject). It is necessary to evaluate the conditions of the educational services offered (Brasil, 2006).

In a wide front of mobilizations, the MIEIB develops a series of resistance mechanisms, manifestos, letters and acts of repudiation, videos, seminars, petitions, with significant participation in the entire national territory, joining forces with other movements such as the National Early Childhood Network. The articulation had the objective of evidencing the risks of this assessment model and its inconsistency with the principles and guidelines of Early Childhood Education policies in effect in that context (Didonet, 2014).

² <https://agesandstages.com/products-pricing/asq3/>

The fact that a decision of the Presidency diverges from the laws and regulations enacted by Dilma Rousseff's administration itself shows the precariousness of the relationship involving hegemony and contradictions. The relationship that was marked by agonism experiences a conflict regarding assessment. This position in defense of standardized assessments is one of the contradictions that marked both administrations of the Workers' Party. As Verger, Fontdevila, and Parcerisa pointed out (2019), the discourse of joining the OECD seduces right-wing and left-wing governments.

The MIEIB's mobilization led the government to give in. And, instead of implementing the assessment, it created a new process of discussion about assessment, based on Ministerial Ordinance No. 1,147/2011, which created the Working Group for Assessment of Early Childhood Education. The MIEIB integrated such Working Group as a political actor and produced the text entitled: "Educação Infantil: Subsídio para a Construção de uma Sistemática de avaliação" ("Early Childhood Education: Support for the Creation of an Assessment Method"). This document contains a proposal for an education assessment **method** that understands assessment as a process that ensures the information production flow, involving analysis, judgment, and decisions that support the preparation and monitoring of policies and programs. In the document, the need for collaboration between the federated states is emphasized, with agreements regarding the concept of quality in early childhood education and the incorporation of input, process, and product indicators (Sousa, 2014).

In 2013, the National Institute for Education Studies and Research – INEP creates the Committee of Experts in the Assessment of Early Childhood Education under the coordination of the Board for Assessment of Primary and Secondary Education – DAEB, as well as created a Working Group for Assessment of Early Childhood Education, composed of different entities, of which the MIEIB was part. This committee met an already existing demand of the movement, which was the need for the Minister of Education to sign a document that created the National Assessment of Early Childhood Education (ANEI).

In the following year, the MIEIB started to advocate for the creation of "a national policy for assessing early childhood education, respecting the accumulated knowledge produced by the assessment Working Group together with INEP" (Cuiabá Letter, 2014, p. 2). The ANEI was included in the scope of the National Primary- and Secondary-Education System (SINAEB) with the purpose of "assessing and improving public education policies". This proposal is, then, different from the standard tests.

The basis is again the document entitled "A Avaliação em Educação Infantil a Partir da Avaliação de Contexto" ("The Assessment in Early Childhood Education based on Assessment of the Context") created in 2015 (Almeida, 2019). In short, assessment is understood as a:

group of aspects that set the type of educational (formative) experience that the Early Childhood Education institution offers to the children and their family members, such as, for example, the quality of the physical, relational, and social environments, the educational experiences proposed, the organization of work by teachers, the relationships with the families, the professional activities and relationships, among others." (Brazil, 2015, p. 27)

The construction of this concept creates connections with the MIEIB's agenda regarding assessment and quality and their implications for ensuring the right to education. This meaning of assessment has diversified the educational policies, being the most addressed demand by the MIEIB between the years of 2015 and 2017, as pointed out by Maudonnet (2019). As we have already mentioned, the meaning of assessment in/of early childhood education is interconnected with the concept of quality (minimum operation conditions associated with a greater number of available places).

However, in 2017, the OECD proposes an assessment for 5-year-old children in an attempt to standardize the alleged skills of children, as well as create an instrument of teacher accountability for such an allegedly universal development that does not consider the context. The global agenda context (Hypólito, 2019) is the one that is influenced by the PISA assessments. Diane Ravitch, one of the greatest critics of standardized assessments, presented her critiques to what she called Baby PISA.³

Thus, this conception is opposed to what was built by the MIEIB from studies in the educational field. Thus, in terms of pedagogy, this concept of assessment is different because it is not understood as an act of classification, of comparison between children, but of children versus themselves and, above all, assessment of the context in which they are inserted. And also a possibility to improve the mediation by the teacher in the learning processes. In this sense, it is possible to affirm that the MIEIB has participated actively in the dislocation and fluctuations of the concepts and has initiated the use and intellectual content of the signifier “assessment”, even in a new hegemony context (Almeida, 2019).

Due to the coup against Brazilian democracy (in 2016), this system was dissolved, together with the great majority of the policies of the Worker’s Party administrations (Coutinho & Moro, 2017, p. 354). Since this period, the relationship of the MIEIB with the administrations is once again one of antagonism and lack of dialogue, as the governments (since 2016) do not take the social movements’ demands into account. Still, in the post-coup government (between 2016 and 2018), business groups were the main interlocutors.

The current government, which began in 2019, is regarded as neoconservative and, at its base, there is a set of conservative religious institutions (from a moral point of view) and neoliberal institutions (in terms of politics) acting in a clientelistic and patrimonialist way in the management of public affairs. These groups have acted incisively in relation to the educational policy (Freitas, 2020). They have progressed in destroying the right to education and defending the privatization of education. They advocate for homeschooling and vouchers for early childhood education (under the so-called Renda Brasil program). These proposals have been criticized by all education movements committed to public education, such as the MIEIB, the National Campaign for the Right to Education, the National Association of Education Research – ANPED and the National Association for Educational Policy and Management – ANPAE, unions, among others.

In 2021, even in the context of a pandemic, the government has been taking the opportunity to approve measures that directly attack social rights. Ordinance No. 10 of January 2021 provides that the assessment policy is now aligned with the National Common Core Curriculum. It is important to note that this “Core” follows the OECD guidelines and the discourse of “learnings”, as we assessed in another paper (Almeida & Rodrigues, 2020). At the same time, no action was taken to guarantee access to education (virtual or presential).

For early childhood education, the new ordinance establishes that “it shall be assessed every two years exclusively through electronic non-cognitive questionnaires” (Brazil, 2021). It is possible to notice that the Ordinance mentions the Curriculum Guidelines, but it is not clear yet how this process shall occur.

The government has also been making changes in teacher education to adjust it to this “model”, and this shall also have consequences for higher education courses. Modifications were made to the structure of the new assessment system – the so-called “New System of Assessment”, which aims at implementing the modifications indicated in the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC), gradually implemented in the next five years, up to 2026. Modifications were made in the

³ <https://dianeravitch.net/2017/12/07/the-horror-here-comes-baby-pisa-testing-5-year-olds/>

areas addressed and in the groups of students assessed. They advocate for customization for each student, in a digital test starting in Year 5 of primary education. This new organization includes early childhood education (pre-school) in the construction of the National Literacy Policy based on phonics literacy. The current policy is antagonistic to MIEIB's proposal based on experience fields. Thus, besides not dialoguing with the movements, it takes measures that contradict the existing studies.

Conclusion

Disputes around the meanings of assessment in the Brazilian early childhood education have arisen from several projects by political movements that seek to sediment meanings to this assessment, movements with distinct and antagonistic values and goals, in disputes that revealed the interests of different sectors, above all, the private sector.

Considering the MIEIB's part in this dispute of meanings, it is from 2007 on, during Lula's (PT) administration, in the context of changes that occurred in the Ministry of Education, that its protagonism becomes more prominent, participating, effectively as a political actor. It participates as a protagonist in discussions about the courses of policies, turning its antagonistic attitude into an agonistic relation (in the words of Chantal Mouffe). Despite this, the conflict around assessment occurred, more explicitly, in 2011, when a division of the federal government of Dilma Rousseff (PT), the Office for Strategic Affairs, proposed the national assessment for children from 0 to 5 years of age, inspired by the American instrument known as ASQ-3 (Ages and Stages Questionnaires) – a large-scale assessment to be implemented in daycare facilities and preschools. This model defends the same “standardization” discourse propagated by the PISA (International Student Assessment) – the focus on skills, as pointed out by authors such as Christian Laval (2019) and Thomas Popkewitz and Lindblad (2016). It is based on a positivist perspective that assumes the linear development and classification of children (normal, delayed, or advanced), a development that must be measured using questionnaires. That proposal emerged as antagonistic to what had been developed in the governments of Lula and Dilma, including with the participation of the MIEIB.

Its proposal was prepared in 2009 and included a context assessment that departed from the discourse of “respect for cultural diversity” and the concept of “formative self-assessment” using quality indicators, from the perspective of the right to education (assessing operating conditions, access, available places, and funding). In this dispute, after a process of resistance, the MIEIB published letters of protest, which caused the Ministry of Education and Culture – MEC to create a specific working group to discuss the concept of assessment, which managed to stop the proposal of a standardized assessment at that point.

The debate resumes after the coup suffered by Dilma, in the process of writing the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC), by the inclusion, in the discourse, of the “skills and competencies” of the children in early childhood education. The BNCC was being constructed with the participation of the MIEIB and other representatives of the civil society and included a concept of assessment of the context – according to the abovementioned perspective. However, when the coup suffered by President Dilma occurred and Temer took over power, hegemony changed and the movements were excluded from the process, and only representatives of private foundations remained. Thus, the final text leaves loopholes for the creation of a standardized assessment of development, based on ideas of children's “skills and competencies”.

The MIEIB continues to develop its resistance actions against the standardization discourse in the offices of education around the country. In previous governments, the dispute took place in “democratic” contexts; however, in the current government, the attitude is authoritarian, with non-recognition of social movements as interlocutors. Furthermore, it assumes the neoconservative

discourse, one perverse ensemble among patrimonialism, conservative moral values, a neoliberal and privatizing discourse that defends proposals like homeschooling and vouchers.

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