

PRESCHOOL TEACHERS AND OTHER PRESCHOOL PROFESSIONALS IN PORTUGAL: DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract:

The opening hours of kindergartens have been gradually extended in Portugal over the last years and so has the time devoted to the social and family support component. It is established in Preschool Education that the preschool teacher is the only professional who can legally perform pedagogical duties in the kindergarten, with a work schedule of 25 hours per week. Reality shows that over the last years, professionals other than preschool teachers have been performing tasks in this educational context, within the social or family support component. The aim of this study is to assess who these professionals are and in what time and space of the kindergarten they develop their activities: whether it is just within the social component or within the instructional component as well. To do so, we sought to determine preschool teachers' opinion regarding the performance of those professionals and identify the areas in which they intervene. We used qualitative and quantitative field research, through a structured questionnaire survey containing closed and open questions, provided in paper format during the months of January and February 2017. The sample is composed of the preschool teachers working in both the private and public sectors in the city of Bragança – Northern Portugal. The results are expected to cast light on the following: the perceptions of a group of preschool teachers regarding the presence of other professionals performing activities within their teaching time; the activities developed; the several curricular areas laid down by the Curricular Guidelines for Preschool Education (CGPE) which are covered by the preschool teachers; and the time assigned to such areas. The study group was selected considering its representativeness regarding

sociodemographic heterogeneity bearing in mind the different profiles (public and private) of the institutions where they worked.

Keywords:*Preschool; Extracurricular Activities; Curricular Areas.*

1-Introduction

This research work intends to reflect on the participation of professionals, other than preschool teachers, who perform educational tasks in Preschool Education institutions in the city of Bragança, Portugal. To do so, we sought the opinion of a group of preschool teachers from the public and private sectors through a questionnaire survey, whose results are presented further ahead. We were able to determine who these professionals are, as well as the areas in which they intervene and when and where they develop their activities in the kindergarten.

2 -Theoretical framework

There is no formal curriculum for Preschool Education in Portugal. However, there are Curricular Guidelines which must be followed by the preschool teacher. The new *Curricular Guidelines for Preschool Education* (CGPE) from 2016 represent a set of pedagogical and organisational general principles which help preschool teachers in the curricular management and in leading the educational process to be developed with the children. They also establish that preschool teachers are the only professionals who are properly specialised and that they must perform five hours of teaching duties with the children in their class in the kindergarten. Besides their special qualifications, preschool teachers are also better trained to plan and assess due to the deeper knowledge they acquire of the group through observation, record and documentation: “They take into account the child’s features, creating opportunities which enable them to fulfil all their potentialities” (Silva et al. 2016:12), and “...they adopt differentiated pedagogical practices which may respond to each child’s individual features and their differences” (Idem, ibidem:12). In a nutshell, the preschool teacher is the only professional qualified to work on all the areas, domains and subdomains of the CGPE.

The action of the preschool teacher must be intentional and purposeful, implying a reflection on the aims of their pedagogical practices and the way they organise and adapt their action to the children’s needs.

This reflection is based on an interactive cycle – observe, plan, act, assess – supported by different ways of recording and documenting data, enabling the preschool teacher to make decisions regarding their practice and to adapt it to the characteristics of each child, group and social context they work in (Silva et al, 2016:5).

Developing this process with the participation of several stakeholders (children, other professionals, parents / families) involves ways of communication and strategies which promote such participation and enable the articulation among the several life contexts of the child. The whole organisation of the activities developed in the preschool classroom is the responsibility of the preschool teacher, who must seek the support of a whole educational team available for the organisation and structuring of such activities.

The participation of other professionals working with the same group of children in the planning and assessment process is one of the means that guarantee the curriculum coherence as well as other 'views' over children's learning. Other professionals as well as parents/families must be involved and held responsible for their children's education. They also have the right to participate in the development of their pedagogical journey (Idem, *ibidem*:16).

Preschool Education has recently been rethought, which has originated significant changes, namely in the public sector, with a considerable increase of the supply of a wider schedule by public institutions (a need that the private sector already met), especially as far as the social or family support component is concerned. In this course of action, the flexibility of preschool institutions' opening hours was established so that the families' difficulties can be mitigated. Therefore, the importance of developing entertainment activities within the social component has been more valued.

The distinction between instructional activities and the social or family support component has raised some issues: since all the time spent by the child at the institution is educational, a distinction must be made between what happens during the five instructional hours that all the children have the right to attend and which are the exclusive responsibility of the preschool teacher and the remaining time that these children spend at the kindergarten, which must also be monitored/supervised by these professionals. A clear distinction must be made between two kinds of time in Preschool Education: instructional time and family support time. The first implies a structured education aiming to provide certain development and learning processes planned by the preschool teacher, thus providing the child with stimulæ and challenges so that they can progress and achieve levels of development and learning which they would not reach on their own. On the other hand, the second represents an informal educational process. The instructional time covers five hours per day whereas the family support time is changeable and also less marked by a well-established sequence, according to families' needs. It is a time marked by a more free and loose pace, when all the children must have the chance to play spontaneously and be free to choose what they wish to do (Silva & Vilhena, 2002).

Since these activities rely essentially on the children's free-will, the proposals to be presented must allow the children to organise themselves, according to the available space, materials and resources. This time must allow the implementation of simple game projects, which may be individual, in pairs, in small groups or with the whole group, and which will preferably be led by the children "It is crucial to create an atmosphere which is orderly and provides the conditions for the children not to feel forced to engage in an activity" (Silva e Vilhena, op. cit:60). It is in this social or family support component that other professionals from different areas will have to participate systematically, through activities which can meet the children and families' needs and interests.

3. Framework and methodologic options

A qualitative and quantitative field research was carried out through the use of a structured questionnaire survey containing closed and open questions and made available in paper format, conducted during the months of January and February 2017. The sample was composed of the preschool teachers working in the public and private sectors in the city of Bragança.

4. Data display and critical analysis: questionnaire survey

The questionnaire survey conducted involved preschool teachers from the city of Bragança, from both the public and the private sectors. A total of 62 people were surveyed, 50% of whom were working in the public sector and the other 50% in the private sector. Within the private sector, the preschool teachers performing educational duties in the nursery rooms of the institutions also responded to the survey.

As far as age is concerned, the population of preschool teachers was distributed as follows: 4.8% (3 teachers) in the 20-30 year-old age range; 25.8% (16 teachers) in the 31-40 year-old range; 22.6% (14 teachers) in 41-50 year-old range; and 46.8% (29 teachers) in the age range between 51 and 60 years old.

The data shows that the majority of the preschool teachers fall in the 51 to 60 year-old range. We also highlight that only three preschool teachers are between 20 and 30 years old.

With regard to gender, we determined that only one of the preschool teachers is male.

In respect to the length of service, 6.5% of the preschool teachers (4) have less than 5 years; 12.9% (8) have between 6 and 10 years; 14.5% (9) have between 11 and 15 years; 6.5% (4) have between 16 and 20 years; 12.9% (8) have between 21 and 25 years; 32.3% (20) have between 26 and 30 years; and 14.5% (9) have more than 31 years of service.

We observe that the lowest percentages of length of service (6.5%), which corresponds to 4 preschool teachers, are those who have less than 5 years and between 16 and 20 years of service. The age range showing the highest length of service corresponds to the teachers who have between 26 and 30 years of service. The data also shows that there are 25 preschool teachers with 0 to 20 years of service, and 37 teachers with 21 to 40 years of service, being the latter the most representative group. This leads us to conclude that there is an ageing population of preschool teachers in Bragança and no renewal of staff.

Among the respondents, only 8.1% (5) have temporary contracts and 91.9% (57) have permanent contracts. Therefore, the results indicate that there are few opportunities of new entries nowadays, since the staff ranks are complete.

With regard to the results concerning the respondents' qualifications, 82.3% (51) have a bachelor or equivalent degree and 17.7% (10) have a master's degree.

Among the respondents, 33 are heads of their class and 27 are not. We must add that there are 33 preschool rooms in Bragança and that all the heads of class were surveyed.

The study showed that there are 3 institutions with only one classroom and one permanent preschool teacher. It also showed that there are institutions where the number of preschool teachers is much higher than the number of classrooms per institution, namely: seven institutions with 15 preschool teachers and nine institutions with eleven teachers. This happens in the School Centres of public institutions.

With regard to the preschool teachers' perceptions concerning the several activities developed in the kindergarten, the study revealed a wide diversity of opinions. The table below depicts the answers given by the respondents regarding the curricular areas covered at the kindergarten.

Table 1. Curricular Areas covered per week

Areas	1x	2x	3 or + x	Never	No Answer
Personal and Social Development	0	1	43	1	17
World Knowledge and Understanding	0	9	34	1	18
Expression and Communication: Motor Development Domain	10	14	19	1	18
Expression and Communication: Oral Language Domain and Approaching Written Language	1	5	38	1	17
Expression and Communication: Mathematical Domain	6	8	30	1	17

Expression and Communication: Artistic Development Domain – Visual Arts Subdomain	5	13	26	1	17
Expression and Communication: Artistic Development Domain – Drama Subdomain	13	20	11	1	17
Expression and Communication: Artistic Development Domain – Music Subdomain	2	9	32	2	17
Expression and Communication: Artistic Development Domain – Dance Subdomain	9	20	14	2	17

We highlight that many of the respondents did not answer this question due to the fact that they were not heads of class and were performing their duties in nursery rooms. However, some of them answered according to previous years in which they were heads of class.

The analysis of the table shows that the most covered areas are the following: Personal and Social Development and Expression and Communication - Oral Language Domain and Approaching Written Language, immediately followed by World Knowledge and Understanding. However, with regard to the first, there is one teacher who only covers this area twice a week and another teacher who never covers it.

The least covered area is that of Expression and Communication and its subdomains, within which the Dance subdomain is the least covered of all. This might be due to the fact that it is a new subdomain of the CGPE.

Considering question 2 “Indicate whether there are professionals other than preschool teachers developing activities during your instructional time in the institution where you work”, 93.4% (57 teachers) answered ‘yes’ and only 6.6% (4 teachers) answered ‘no’. Only one teacher did not answer this question. Therefore, the data shows that in most institutions there are professionals other than preschool teachers developing activities during teachers’ instructional time, which is the central question of this research work.

In question 2.1 “Indicate in which area/domain such professionals develop their activities”, we determined that those professionals other than preschool teachers predominantly develop activities in the following areas: Music (75.9% - 44 answers); Physical Education (63.8% - 37 answers); Foreign Language - English (32.8% - 19 answers); and ICT (1.7% - 1 answer). The topic ‘others’ obtained 22.4% - 13 answers, among which: the domain of Dance with 4 answers; the domain of Oral Language and Approaching Written Language with 3 answers; Body Language with one answer; Early Intervention with one answer; Swimming with one answer; and Health (ensured by nurses) with one answer. By Analysing this data, we found that there is a predominance of activities guided towards Physical Education and

Music, which may have one of the following possible explanations: either the preschool teachers' lack of training in these areas or the excess of professionals specialised in these areas, which may lead to their recruitment to work on these components at the kindergarten.

In light of the 57 answers obtained to question 2.2 "What is the frequency of these activities?", we confirmed that the activities are mostly developed once a week (84.2% - 48 answers) or twice a week (12.3% - 7 answers), and that School Health intervenes in Preschool Education institutions 2 or 3 times per term. These answers prove the systematic nature of these activities within the preschool teacher's instructional time.

With regard to question 2.3 "What is the length of these activities?", all the 57 answers given show unanimity with 100% stating a length up to 50 minutes. This is a positive aspect since the time assigned to these activities is not excessive.

In question 2.4 "Whose initiative was it for these other professionals' intervention in the kindergarten?", the data shows that among the 58 answers obtained, 51.7% (30 answers) indicate the administrative board of the institution; 31% (18 answers) indicate the administrative board of the School Centre; 25.9% (15 answers) indicate the preschool teacher; 10.3% (6 answers) indicate the children's parents; and 8.6% (5 answers) indicate 'others' such as the speech therapist, the Town Council (1 answer) and the Sports Department of the Polytechnic Institute (1 answer). Therefore, we can conclude that in most cases, the initiative came from the administrative board of either the institutions or the School Centres (82.7% - 48 answers). We also highlight that 25.9% (15 answers) indicate that it was the head of class preschool teacher's initiative and 10.3% (6 answers) stated that it had been the parents' initiative. The fact that the lowest percentage corresponds to the preschool teacher's initiative is a positive aspect, since it proves that the initiative of recruiting other professionals is mostly taken by the administrative boards of the institutions or School Centres.

In question 2.5 "Do you consider the existence of these activities during instructional time as an asset?", there were 59 answers. Among these, 88.1% (52 answers) consider these activities during instructional time as an asset. Only 10.2% (6 answers) did not consider them as an asset, and 1.7% (1) answered 'maybe'. These answers indicate the preschool teachers' concern with curricular enrichment, beneficial to the child's holistic development, obtained through the intervention of other specialised professionals.

The majority of the opinions expressed reveal that the activities led by professionals other than preschool teachers are an asset to the children's development, representing a complement to the work developed by the preschool teacher. Only one small minority of answers point such activities as negative, on the grounds that they disturb the routine of the activities

planned by the preschool teacher, considering them as an asset only when developed outside the instructional time and within the family support component as extracurricular activities.

Question 2.6 asked the respondents' opinion regarding several items in which they would indicate the options they mostly identified with, namely: 1 – I totally disagree; 2 – I disagree; 3 – I partially agree; 4 – I agree; 5 – I totally agree.

Statement a) "Should professionals other than preschool teachers develop regular activities during the kindergarten instructional time?" obtained 15 answers (24.2%) of 'I totally disagree'; 7 answers (11.3%) stating 'I disagree'; 15 answers (24.2%) 'I partially agree'; 17 answers (27.4%) 'I agree'; and 8 respondents (12.9%) chose 'I totally agree'. The results obtained in this item were totally disparate since 27.4% of the respondents agree with the statement, 24.2% partially agree and 24.2% totally disagree. Only 12.9% of the preschool teachers totally agree with the statement.

Statement b) "Should professionals other than preschool teachers occasionally develop activities during the kindergarten instructional time?" obtained the following answers: 18 (35.3%) stated to partially agree; 15 (29.4%) said they agree; 7 (13.7%) totally disagree; and 6 (11.8%) disagree. This item reveals a higher consensus regarding the occasional development of activities by other professionals during instructional time.

The answers to question c) "Should professionals other than preschool teachers develop activities in the kindergarten only during extracurricular time?" were as follows: 13 respondents (25.5%) partially agree; 12 (23.5%) agree and totally agree; 7 (13.7%) totally disagree and disagree. Most of the preschool teachers surveyed think that the activities developed by other professionals must be implemented during extracurricular time.

Statement d) "Only preschool teachers should develop activities during the kindergarten instructional time" obtained the following answers: 13 respondents (25.5%) totally disagree; the same number (13 - 25.5%) totally agree; 11 (21.6%) disagree; 9 (17.6%) agree; and 5 (9.8%) partially agree. 51% of the preschool teachers surveyed are in antagonistic positions, namely of total agreement and total disagreement.

The answers regarding statement e) "Should extracurricular or family support activities exist in the kindergarten?" were as follows: 31 preschool teachers (60.8%) stated to totally agree; 10 (19.6%) said they agree; 5 (9.8%) partially agree; and 4 respondents (7.8%) totally disagree. The vast majority of the preschool teachers surveyed agree with the existence of extracurricular activities in the kindergarten.

Question 2.7 "In what situations do other preschool teachers develop activities within the kindergarten instructional time?" was answered by 48 respondents. Among these, 49 (84.5%) indicated that 'only in the absence of

the head of group teacher’; 7 (12.1%) chose ‘in activities for which the teacher does not feel prepared’; 14 (24.1%) chose the option ‘others’. A wide variety of explanations were given for the fact that other preschool teachers who are not the head of the class are developing activities during the kindergarten instructional time, namely: the organisation of collective activities, the existence of a very distinctive age range group, or the recruitment of support to the head of class teacher by the kindergarten.

5. Final Considerations

By way of conclusion, this research work revealed that there are many professionals, who are not preschool teachers, developing different activities within the Preschool Education contexts in the city of Bragança. Such activities are developed either systematically within the preschool teacher’s instructional time or within the social or family support component. We believe that these professionals represent an asset to the kindergarten, provided that they are supported by the preschool teacher, both during instructional time and family support time. What is not desirable, however, is the systematicity of their action during instructional time, since this time of 5 hours per day is the responsibility of the preschool teacher, who is the best prepared professional to cover the several areas, domains and subdomains laid down in the CGPE. The preschool teacher may seek the collaboration of other professionals, but always occasionally and to meet the needs of their educational purpose. The systematicity of those professionals’ action must only occur during the social or family support component.

It is our opinion that Preschool Education, which is responsible for the management of instructional time, will have to ensure ways of articulation and coherence with the family support component. Such decision is, in our view, an organisational one and must, therefore, be included in the institution’s project and involve other stakeholders apart from those directly involved in the children’s education (preschool teacher or animator/assistant). Given the diversity of possible situations within the preschool education national network, it is important to clarify the possible roles and duties of the several stakeholders.

Despite not being against the intervention of professionals with other qualifications in the family support component, we share the claims of Silva & Vilhena (2002) and support the idea that the preschool teacher must play a paramount role in ensuring a certain educational continuity between the two moments while also marking their diversity.

The institutional status of the professionals who ensure the family support component may vary from preschool assistants who accompany the curricular activities to staff recruited for that specific purpose and only

performing that particular duty, as observed in most of the answers to our survey.

Currently, socio-educational animation is a career with specific features, for which there is specific training, whether it is through vocational courses of levels 2 and 3 or through a bachelor degree. In the light of the answers obtained in the survey, we also found that the skills in an artistic area (playing a musical instrument, taking part in a drama club) or in a sports area (practising a sports modality) represent privileged criteria in the selection of the professional.

According to Silva & Vilhena (2002), such recruitment should involve a previous interview and might consider the possibility of a probation period (two weeks to one month) under the supervision of a preschool teacher or of the kindergarten head teacher. This is not confirmed by any of the answers given to our survey.

Since socio-educational animation represents a professional activity, those who perform it should have opportunities of on-the-job training, whether it is in the institution or together with other professionals performing the same duties, all while making the most of the training opportunities arising from the articulation work with preschool teachers. Parents and guardians play an important role in the decision-making regarding socio-educational animation since it is related to their needs. The ways of attendance and the working period of such activities must meet the whole of the parents' needs. Therefore, this staff should have the possibility to integrate a specific framework and a time to plan and assess their action together.

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