

7Research Article

Implementing Daycare Centers in Brazilian Federal Universities: In Search of a Model for a Political-Pedagogical Project

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Abstract

This study addresses the construction of Political-Pedagogical Projects (PPPs) for university daycare centers in Brazilian federal institutions, with the practical objective of guiding the development of a PPP for the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR). University daycare centers are recognized as strategic instruments for gender equity in academia, enabling mother-scientists, students, and staff to reconcile research and professional activities with parental responsibilities. Despite their importance, these units face persistent challenges, including unstable funding, insufficient qualified personnel, and a lack of comprehensive educational frameworks. The research adopts an exploratory documentary approach with a qualitative methodology. Data collection involved the identification of federal universities with operational early childhood education units whose PPPs were publicly available, resulting in a purposive sample comprising the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB), and the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM). Document analysis followed the principles of Thematic Content Analysis, organized into two analytical dimensions: pedagogical, encompassing conceptions of childhood, learning theories, the role of play, and assessment methods; and organizational, covering infrastructure, human resources, and integration with undergraduate courses. Results indicate that all analyzed institutions reject the welfare-oriented model, aligning with Vygotskian socio-interactionism and positioning the child as a subject of rights. The documents also converge in integrating daycare centers into the university's teaching, research, and extension triad. Variations were identified in assessment instruments, physical infrastructure, and teacher-to-student ratios, reflecting local budgetary and institutional constraints. The findings demonstrate that no single exportable model exists; rather, effective PPPs require a balance between pedagogical rigor, administrative flexibility, and institutional commitment to the university community.

Keywords

University Daycare, Political-Pedagogical Project, Academic Mothers, Higher Education, Gender Equity

1. Introduction and Purpose

The discussion regarding the retention and advancement of women in academic careers has gained significant prominence in recent years, highlighting structural barriers that impede

gender equity within universities. Supporting mothers in science necessarily implies creating concrete and material conditions so that research activities – often exhaustive and

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demanding full-time dedication – can be reconciled with motherhood. In Brazil, a substantial portion of academic production is the result of research work developed in public universities, carried out largely by graduate students and faculty members who, at a certain point in their trajectories, face the challenge of balancing scientific productivity with parental care.

Research and teaching in public universities are activities often difficult to reconcile with maternal responsibilities, especially when considering that support mechanisms for mother-scientists are still limited in Brazil. The so-called "scissors effect," described by Gorziza and Buono [6], which depicts the decrease in female presence as one advances to the top of the career ladder, is frequently exacerbated by the lack of support infrastructure. Among the initiatives to mitigate this scenario and provide effective support to faculty, student, and technical staff mothers, one can mention the creation of early childhood education units, such as daycare centers, within the university's physical space.

This challenge is not exclusive to the Brazilian context; it reflects a global phenomenon often described as the 'maternal wall' in academia. International studies indicate that the impact of parenthood on scientific productivity is disproportionately negative for women compared to men. Research by Morgan et al. [11], analyzing global publication trends, suggests that the parenthood penalty is long-lasting for mothers in science. Furthermore, Staniscuaski et al. [14] highlight that this gender gap was exacerbated during the pandemic, reinforcing the urgent need for institutional policies — such as on-campus childcare — to prevent the loss of female talent in higher education globally.

However, implementing daycare centers in universities is a complex task that requires the analysis of numerous variables, ranging from architectural adequacy to the definition of budgetary guidelines. More than a custodial space, these units must be educational spaces of excellence. This work describes part of the effort to construct a Political-Pedagogical Project (PPP) for the implementation of a daycare center at the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR). The central objective is to present the process of surveying, analyzing, and systematizing PPPs from other federal institutions that serve as a benchmark for the creation of guiding documents specific to the UFPR context. It is the result of activities from an extension project that aims not only at theoretical production but also at providing practical assistance to faculty, student, and administrative staff mothers who work and study at the university.

The research problem guiding this investigation can be synthesized in the following question: How to construct Political-Pedagogical Projects for university daycare centers that meet the specificity of this public while simultaneously fulfilling the social function of the university? The premise guiding the work is that the PPPs currently in force in other Federal Institutions of Higher Education (IFES) provide important contributions, both in their successes and in their gaps, to guide the elaboration of new PPPs. Thus, the aim is to avoid reinventing

the wheel, learning from consolidated experiences to propose a model that integrates child care into academic life.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Context of University Daycare Centers in Brazil

The creation of daycare centers in federal universities is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of Brazilian education, with most of them established in the 1980s and 1990s, often as a result of union demands and feminist movements within academia. Having been originally created with a welfare-oriented intent to provide care for the children of students, professors, and staff, allowing them to balance their personal and professional lives, these institutions have undergone re-significations over the years. With the promulgation of the Federal Constitution of 1988 [2], which established education as a social right and a duty of the State and the family, and with the advent of the Law of Guidelines and Bases for National Education [3], early childhood education came to be seen as the first stage of basic education, rather than merely as social assistance, which imposed new challenges on these units.

Despite their strategic importance, daycare centers in federal universities face numerous challenges to guarantee the quality and continuity of the care provided. Raupp [12] points out that the lack of perennial funding, the scarcity of qualified permanent professionals, and, at times, the absence of a comprehensive educational approach that integrates the daycare into the university project, compromise the service provision of such institutions. Many live in a legal-administrative limbo, oscillating between the dean of student affairs and the schools of education, which weakens their institutional identity.

In the international landscape, the availability of on-campus childcare is widely recognized as a critical factor for the retention of female faculty and graduate students. Mason et al. [9], in their extensive research on American universities, argue that family-friendly policies, specifically childcare centers, are decisive for women's progression to tenure tracks. Recent economic studies reinforce this: Casarico et al. [4] demonstrate that liquidity constraints preventing households from accessing childcare generate significant inefficiencies and amplify gender gaps in the labor market. Similarly, comparative studies in Europe, such as those by Minello et al. [10], suggest that the lack of institutional support during crises disproportionately affects academic mothers, while universities offering robust infrastructure demonstrate higher indices of gender equity [7]. These examples reinforce the argument that the daycare center is not merely a benefit, but a strategic institutional asset.

In this sense, university daycare centers must be seen as an integral part of the university, operating under the logic of the

teaching, research, and extension triad, with a focus on the holistic development of the child. They are not merely places for care, but internship fields, laboratories for psychological and pedagogical observation, and spaces for teacher training. The involvement of the children's families in the care provided at the daycare centers is also essential, which includes providing support and guidance to parents on how to care for their children and promoting their involvement in the daycare activities [12]. The physical proximity between the parents' workplace/study place and the daycare facilitates this transit, allowing for a coexistence that is rare in other educational contexts.

2.2. The Political-Pedagogical Project as a Management and Identity Tool

Family involvement, integration with the university, and the pedagogical principles that outline the functioning of university daycare centers are examples of complex themes that must be part of the implementation project of such units. Institutionally, it is in the Political-Pedagogical Project (PPP) that early childhood education centers formally establish their actions, guidelines, and principles [13]. The PPP is not a bureaucratic document to be kept in a drawer; it is, essentially, the documentation of the daycare's identity and strategic planning.

As defined by Vasconcelos [15], the PPP: "Is the global plan of the institution. It can be understood as the systematization, never definitive, of a Participatory Planning process, which perfects itself and materializes along the journey, defining clearly the type of educational action one wishes to perform. It is a theoretical-methodological instrument for intervention and transformation of reality. It is an element of organization and integration of the institution's practical activity in this process of transformation."

The "political" dimension of the project refers to the institution's commitment to the formation of citizens and the social function of the public university, while the "pedagogical" dimension defines the methodologies and educational intentions. The construction of a PPP is fundamentally collective [8] and participatory [5], presupposing that the involved community – managers, faculty, technical staff, parents, and even the children, as far as possible – participates in the process [1]. In a university, this collective construction gains even more democratic contours, given the environment conducive to debate. The document consists, in essence, of the institution's Strategic Planning, needing to answer questions about what kind of human being one wants to form and for which society. For its achievement and materialization in a university daycare center, it is necessary to follow rigorous steps, such as:

- 1) Conduct a diagnosis of reality: This implies considering aspects such as the infrastructure available on campus, the socioeconomic profile of the faculty, student body, and technical staff (who are the users?), and the available budgetary resources.
- 2) Define objectives and goals: Establishing educational

objectives aligned with the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), but also with the university's values.

- 3) Characterize the school profile: Including the clear definition of the mission, vision, values, and ethical and aesthetic principles that will guide the project.
- 4) Perform curricular planning: Defining curricular guidelines, programmatic contents, work axes, teaching methodologies, and forms of assessment of child development (without a classificatory character).
- 5) Define the Pedagogical Organization: In terms of democratic school management, routines, schedules, continuing education for teachers, and the relationship with the external and internal community.
- 6) Implement and monitor the PPP: Creating mechanisms so that the document leaves the paper.
- 7) Evaluate and revise the PPP: Understanding it as a living document, subject to alterations according to changes in the university reality.
- 8) Register and document it: To ensure institutional memory and public transparency.

3. Methodological Procedures

This study is characterized as exploratory documentary research with a qualitative approach. The choice of this method is justified by the need to investigate official institutional documents (Political-Pedagogical Projects - PPPs) to understand the values, pedagogical conceptions, and administrative guidelines that formalize early childhood education within the federal academic environment.

3.1. Research Design and Data Collection

The data collection process was conducted in three stages. First, a mapping of Federal Universities in Brazil that possess early childhood education units was performed. To define the study sample, the following inclusion criteria were applied: (1) The institution must be a Federal University; (2) The daycare center must be currently operational; and (3) The Political-Pedagogical Project (PPP) or equivalent management document must be available in full on the institution's official website or transparency portal.

Based on these criteria, a purposive sample of three universities was selected: the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB), and the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM). This selection was not random; it was designed to ensure regional diversity (covering the Northeast and South regions of Brazil) and to analyze institutions with a consolidated history of providing childcare services, offering robust documents that serve as reliable benchmarks.

3.2. Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis of the documents followed the principles of

Thematic Content Analysis. After the initial reading of the material (*skimming*), the data were coded and organized into two main analytical categories defined *a posteriori*:

- 1) Pedagogical Dimension: Encompassing the conception of childhood, learning theories (e.g., Vygotsky), the role of play, and assessment methods.
- 2) Organizational Dimension: Including physical infrastructure, staff composition, teacher/student ratio, and integration with undergraduate courses (teaching, research, and extension).

This categorization allowed for a systematic comparison between the documents, identifying convergences (common core) and divergences (local adaptations) presented in the Results section.

3.3. Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Since this research relies exclusively on documents available in the public domain, it does not involve direct interaction with human subjects, thus exempting it from submission to an Ethics Committee, in accordance with Brazilian scientific regulations.

However, it is important to acknowledge a methodological limitation: as a documentary study, the analysis is restricted to the formal discourse of the institutions. It does not capture the subjective perceptions of the school community (parents, teachers, and technical staff) regarding the daily implementation of these projects. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies incorporate empirical methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to validate the practical application of these PPPs.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the Political-Pedagogical Projects (PPPs) from UFBA, UFPB, and UFSM revealed how the theoretical guidelines of early childhood education are materialized in the institutional management of federal universities. To facilitate the visualization of the comparative data requested by the review, [Table 1](#) summarizes the main convergences and specificities identified in the documents, categorized according to the dimensions defined in the methodology.

Table 1. Comparative Synthesis of Analyzed PPPs.

Category	Analytical Dimension	Key Findings (Common Core)	Observed Variations (Local Specificities)
Pedagogical	Theoretical Basis	Predominance of Vygotskian Socio-interactionism; Child as a subject of rights.	N/A (High theoretical alignment).
	Role of Play	Centrality of the "Toy Library" (<i>Brinquedoteca</i>) as a learning laboratory.	Distinction between free play vs. directed pedagogical play.
	Assessment	Formative evaluation without classificatory intent.	Instruments vary: Portfolios (visual) vs. Descriptive Reports vs. Field Diaries.
Organizational	Institutional Role	Integration with the University Triad (Teaching, Research, Extension).	Degree of openness to the external community (neighborhood vs. academic community only).
	Infrastructure	Recognition of specific biological needs (food/rest).	Adaptation of old buildings vs. Purpose-built facilities.
	Human Resources	Multidisciplinary teams (educators, nutritionists, psychologists).	Teacher/Student ratio varies depending on hiring capacity.

Source: Developed by the authors based on the analyzed documents.

4.1. The Pedagogical Dimension

Play as a Language In all analyzed documents, there is a clear rejection of the welfare-oriented (*assistencialista*) model. Instead, the PPPs align with the Vygotskian perspective, highlighting the Zone of Proximal Development. The data describes the family not as a passive client, but as the primary social nucleus for the construction of symbolic imagery. Consequently, the Toy Library appears in the results not merely as

a recreational space, but as a pedagogical device where the child negotiates meanings with peers. This creates a "microcosm of diversity," reflecting the heterogeneous environment of the university itself, which aggregates individuals from diverse cultural and social backgrounds.

4.2. The Organizational Dimension

The University Ecosystem Unlike municipal or private day-care centers, the analyzed federal units operate under the logic

of the academic triad. The results show that these daycare centers function as internship fields for undergraduate courses such as Pedagogy, Psychology, Nursing, and Physical Education. This characteristic is descriptive of a symbiotic relationship: the university provides the workforce in training (interns), and the daycare provides the laboratory for practice. This model helps mitigate the "lack of qualified professionals" mentioned by Raupp [12], creating a sustainable ecosystem for care.

4.3. Critical Analysis

The Daycare as an Institutional Strategy Beyond the descriptive data, a critical analysis reveals that the PPP is a potent tool for equity. By formalizing the daycare center as an educational space integrated into the campus, universities address the "maternal wall" mentioned in the literature [11]. The analysis suggests that the success of these units lies in their dual function:

- 1) Educational: Offering high-quality education for children (guaranteed by the PPP's rigor).
- 2) Political: Serving as a retention policy for mother-scientists.

However, the analysis also uncovers tensions. The variations in infrastructure and staffing ratios (Table 1) indicate that materialization is often constrained by budget limitations. Importantly, as noted in the results, these local variations do not contradict the pedagogical premises; rather, they demonstrate that there is no single exportable "ideal model." Therefore, the "Model PPP" sought by this research serves as a flexible guideline, which must be adapted to avoid a standardization that would neglect the specificities of each local context.

5. Implications of the Research and Conclusion

The construction of PPPs for university daycare centers cannot be seen as an isolated act of technical writing; it is only part of the process of structuring a support space for mothers who work in the academic environment – whether as faculty, researchers, students, technical staff, or outsourced workers. The existence of these units is a *sine qua non* condition for the democratization of access and permanence in the university and for combating gender inequalities in scientific production.

Formulating a PPP adherent to the university profile, the needs of the families involved, and the expectations of the community requires clear parameters and concrete examples. The research demonstrated that, although there is a common legal and theoretical basis in Brazil, the materialization of these principles varies according to the institutional culture.

The PPPs identified and analyzed in this study provided crucial inspiration and a technical basis for the construction of the PPP underlying the implementation of a new early childhood education unit at the Federal University of Paraná. The

analysis of the similarities and differences among the PPPs of university daycare centers provides secure guidelines for the formulation of new documents in daycare centers that may be installed in various Brazilian universities, suggesting that the path to success involves a balance between pedagogical rigor, administrative flexibility, and political commitment to the university community. It is expected that this work will foster the debate on the expansion of the parenting support network in Brazilian public higher education.

Abbreviations

BNCC	National Common Curricular Base
IFES	Federal Institutions of Higher Education
LDB	Law of Guidelines and Bases for National Education
PPP	Political-Pedagogical Project
UFBA	Federal University of Bahia
UFPA	Federal University of Pará
UFPR	Federal University of Paraná
UFMS	Federal University of Santa Maria

Author Contributions

Gustavo Costa Meireles: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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