

The Displacements of the Notion of Childhood in Neoliberal Rationality: An Analysis on Contemporary Curricular Policies for Childhood Education

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Abstract: This article is an excerpt from a research that aims to analyze the displacements in the concept of childhood and its ways of educating it in contemporary curricular policies for the stage of Early Childhood Education. Towards this end, official documents that gain notoriety for this stage of Basic Education were analyzed: The National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education - DCNEI (2009) and the Common National Curricular Base - BNCC (2017a). The realization of this research was based on the post-structuralist perspective, with the contributions of the author Michel Foucault, using government as an analytical tool and the notion of governmentality as an intelligibility grid. The analysis of the documents highlights the displacements in the understanding of a childhood of rights, in the DCNEI, to the notion of competent childhood, present in the BNCC.

Keywords: Curricular policies; Childhoods. DCNEI and BNCC; Neoliberal governmentality

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1. Introduction

In the current scenario, childhood has been gaining prominence, with children being recognized for their specificities and rights, occupying a central place in terms of their education. As landmarks in this process, we can mention the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988, which affirms early childhood education from zero to six years as a right of the child and a duty of the State ^[1], and the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law - LDBEN (Law No. 9394/96), which considers Early Childhood Education as the first stage of Basic Education ^[2].

In this context, the emergence of a series of public policies, especially curricular policies, has taken place. These policies aim to guide pedagogical practices and shape the conduct of children and educators in the school environment. Therefore, it is important to highlight how childhood is being narrated, guided, and constructed through contemporary curriculum documents. This article presents a segment of a research project with the following issue: What shifts are made in the ways of understanding childhood in the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education - DCNEI (2009a) ^[3] and the National Common Curricular Base - BNCC (2017a) ^[4]? The objective is to demonstrate how the National

Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and the National Common Curricular Base are shaping the identity of young learners, producing a specific model of childhood based on a neoliberal rationality.

In the movement of recognition and valorization of Early Childhood Education, we notice that, despite the current discourses affirming children's rights based on their specificities, there are also other discourses seeking to increasingly insert these young learners as a "becoming" and "competent" being. With the aim of discussing some of the shifts that occur in current curricular policies for Early Childhood Education, we analyze two curriculum documents that guide Early Childhood Education in contemporary times. This study is based on the contributions of Michel Foucault and authors who engage with the post-structuralist perspective. The analytical corpus consists of the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and the National Common Curricular Base. To enhance the reflections, we also analyze the CNE/CEB Opinion No. 20/2009 ^[5], which revises the DCNEI (National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education) of 1999, and the CNE/CP Resolution No. 2/2017 ^[6], which establishes and guides the implementation of the Base.

Throughout the article, we first explain the main analytical concepts that guide our examination of the two curriculum documents under study. Subsequently, we briefly present the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (2009) and the National Common Curricular Base (2017a), particularly focusing on discussions related to Early Childhood Education, to provide the reader with an understanding of how these documents were structured and conceptualized. Finally, we aim to highlight the shifts concerning childhood in the discourses conveyed in these documents. We seek to demonstrate that the Guidelines configure childhood as a period of rights, ensuring the exercise of children's citizenship. On the other hand, in the Base, we can also perceive this concept at work, but there is an emphasis on a competent childhood, as children are expected to learn minimal knowledge to become adults who can compete in a society aligned with economic logic.

2. Governing as a theoretical-methodological tool, and governmentality as an analytical framework

Governmentality, as well as governance, were choices that allowed us to think about how childhood and its modes of education are being produced and/or conducted from a certain historical perspective. The concept of government as a theoretical and methodological tool made it possible to observe the ways in which the behaviors of child subjects are being directed in the contestation that is the curriculum. On the other hand, the concept of governmentality as a framework for understanding allowed for an analysis of the shifts in the concept of childhood that appear in the two analyzed documents.

We can understand governmentality as ways of guiding and allowing oneself to be guided in conduct. Veiga-Neto states that "if we understand education as the set of actions through which some lead others, we will soon realize that it occupies a place of honor in studies on governmentality" ^[7]. Thus, we can understand governmentality as a way of guiding teaching and the curriculum through public policies that are implicated in the production of a certain way of being a child. We emphasize that curriculum public policies are one of the strategies of governmentality of childhood since these documents establish ways of being and existing in society.

It is possible to understand the concept of governmentality from two perspectives. The first concerns a rationality, actions, knowledge, and strategies of government, which allow the exercise of power, sometimes through discipline, and at other times through biopolitics, which targets the population. As Lockmann (2019, p.47) highlights, "It is, therefore, about how we think the action of governing, or even, how the technologies of government are undertaken from a political rationality that puts them into operation in a given time." ^[8]

The second understanding of the concept of governmentality is the study in which Foucault (2008)

demonstrates the process through which the State became governmentalized. This understanding helps us comprehend the techniques of government that are applied to individuals and the ways in which governance is exercised over specific populations throughout history. It relates to Foucault's research on the "historical shift that occurred in the ways of conducting the behavior of individuals and populations throughout the history of the West. It is a history of the arts of government" [8]. Thus, Foucault defines the concept of governmentality in the course "Security, Territory, Population," in the lecture on February 1, 1978, at the Collège de France as follows:

"The term 'governmentality' refers to a set composed of institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of a very specific, albeit highly complex, form of power that primarily targets the population. Its main form of knowledge is political economy, and its essential technical instrument is the apparatus of security. Secondly, 'governmentality' refers to the trend, the driving force that has continually led, for a long time, throughout the West, towards the preeminence of this type of power we can call 'government' over all others - sovereignty, discipline - and which has brought about, on the one hand, the development of a whole series of specific apparatuses of government, and on the other hand, the development of a whole series of knowledges. Finally, 'governmentality' should be understood as the process, or rather, the outcome of the process through which the justice State of the Middle Ages, which in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries became the administrative State, gradually found itself 'governmentalized' [9]."

It is important to highlight that this study is based on the first understanding of governmentality, which comprehends how forms of governance are operated through a specific rationality, reflecting in the analyzed curriculum documents and producing effects on the behavior of young subjects. Along these lines, it becomes evident that the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and the National Common Core Curriculum are immersed in a particular rationality that employs some biopolitical strategies to guide the behavior of young subjects. These strategies manifest both at the individual level and in public policies, shaping a specific type of child.

3. Contemporary curricular policies for early childhood education

The curriculum policies for Early Childhood Education have followed paths that relate to the process of recognizing the specificities of childhood and Early Childhood Education as the first stage of Basic Education. This journey, which involved power struggles, resulted in the formulation of public policies, with the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI) and the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC) being part of this process.

The first National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education were approved in 1999, and in the following years, the need for their revision became apparent. The revision of the initial guidelines took place through a process of reflection, considering changes in lifestyles, legislation, understanding of childhood, curriculum, and pedagogical practices, which were perceived during the ten years they were in effect. The new National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education underwent an extensive process of discussion until they were formally instituted in 2009, occupying a prominent place in education debates. As stated by Flores and Albuquerque:

"It can be affirmed that the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI), established by the Basic Education Chamber of the National Council of Education (CEB/CNE) in Resolution 05/09, originated from a democratic process of revising the previous guidelines (Resolution CEB/CNE 01/99). The objective was to promote greater participation of society in defining educational policies for the early childhood education area [10]."

In this construction process, there was broad participation from institutions, universities, social movements, Early Childhood Education forums, teachers, and researchers in this field. Thus, Opinion No.

20/09 resulted in Resolution CNE/CEB No. 05/09, approved on December 17, 2009. This Resolution establishes the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education, aiming to guide the pedagogical practices in daycare centers and preschools. Flores and Albuquerque (2015) stated that:

“the new Guidelines, received in the field in 2009, marked an important milestone in the history of Brazilian Early Childhood Education. This significance is attributed not only to their normative and conceptual advancements compared to the preceding Resolution but also to the democratic process of their development, which involved various entities, organizations, and individuals associated with the field for over a year. Considering their mandatory nature concerning municipal pedagogical proposals for this age group, it is essential to highlight some guiding principles of this document concerning indispensable definitions in the field of Early Childhood Education ^[10].

Indeed, this mandatory document aims to bring together principles, foundations, and procedures to care for and educate children in Brazilian daycare centers and preschools. It defines what constitutes this stage of education, advocating for children’s rights and permeating all pedagogical practices. The principles and guidelines presented in the document are intended to guide policies, curricula for daycare centers and preschools, as well as teacher training.

According to the Resolution that establishes the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI), the child needs to be respected in their individuality and uniqueness as a social being with rights. This document legitimizes childhood, based on the idea that the child plays a social role and constructs their citizenship within the school environment, as seen in the following excerpt:

“According to Article 4 of the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI), the pedagogical proposals for Early Childhood Education should consider that the child, who is at the center of curricular planning, is a historical subject with rights. Through interactions, relationships, and everyday practices, the child constructs their personal and collective identity, engages in play, imagination, fantasy, desires, learning, observation, experimentation, narration, questioning, and the construction of meaning about nature and society, thus contributing to the production of culture ^[5].”

Indeed, we can affirm that the 2009 National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI) contributed to the movement that was already present in the field, aiming to consolidate and affirm the specificities and unique identity of Early Childhood Education through a curriculum that differs from what is proposed for the Elementary Education. In Early Childhood Education, the curriculum is constituted by everyday practices, guided by the experiences of the children. It is not pre-established content, listed for all preschools, that organizes the curriculum, but rather the experiences that are actualized through interactions provided in the educational daily life. With these principles in mind, the child becomes the focal point of curricular planning, and the teacher becomes the mediator who needs pedagogical intentions to promote the development of the children. Thus, the teacher’s role involves intentional and thoughtful guidance in fostering the growth and learning experiences of the children. Therefore,

“the child, who is at the center of curricular planning, is a historical subject with rights. Their development occurs through interactions, relationships, and daily practices made available and established by them with adults and children of different ages in groups and cultural contexts in which they are involved. Under these conditions, the child forms friendships, engages in play with water or soil, engages in pretend play, desires, learns, observes, converses, experiments, questions, and constructs meanings about the world and their personal and collective identities, thus contributing to culture. Current scientific knowledge supports the view that from birth, children seek to attribute meaning to their experiences, and in this process, they turn to understanding the material and social world, gradually expanding the scope of their curiosity and concerns. These processes are mediated by the guidance, materials, spaces, and times that organize learning situations, as well as the explanations and meanings to which they have access ^[5].”

With that notion, the teacher will plan their actions to respect the rights of children and their autonomy

as active subjects. In line with these understandings of caring and educating children in Early Childhood Education, the Guidelines present three principles that should underpin pedagogical proposals: ethical, political, and aesthetic principles.

It is important to highlight, as well, that interactions and play are considered the main priorities of the curriculum. For this purpose, according to the document, it is necessary for children to experience their diverse childhoods, as it is one of their rights. This right is developed through various languages concerning the learning of young subjects, respecting their diverse perceptions of the context in which they are placed.

In this sense, assessment is a significant tool for teachers to guide learning, rethink practices, and observe how children organize and interact. The document emphasizes the importance of documenting children's learning through portfolios, reports, and pedagogical documentation, so that Elementary Education can be informed about children's development for a meaningful transition. However, it is important to make it clear that the document defends that Early Childhood Education does not have a preparatory nature.

Although this connection with Elementary Education seeks to ensure continuity in the learning process for children, the document emphasizes that the experiences children have in Early Childhood Education are different from those in the early years of Elementary Education. Early Childhood Education is not preparatory because the specificities of this stage differ from those of Elementary Education. This approach is in line with the discussions and concepts developed over the years by the field of Early Childhood Education.

With the DCNEI still in effect, the process of developing the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC) began in 2005, encompassing the Early Childhood Education stage as well. The BNCC, which was approved on December 20, 2017, went through a lengthy process that included setbacks during its construction, considering the different political moments in this period. Thus, the process of developing the BNCC was distinct from the path of constructing the DCNEI because, from the beginning of its formulation, it faced criticisms and challenges.

The Base was already foreseen in the Federal Constitution of 1988, the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB) of 1996, and the National Education Plan (PNE) of 2014. However, it was from Law No. 12.796 in 2013, which amended articles of the LDB, that the idea of a Base for Early Childhood Education began to be considered. As pointed out by Mota:

“the need for a common base for the construction of the Basic Education curriculum is signaled in various legal documents within the Brazilian education system. Since the 1988 Constitution, this need has been highlighted in different ways, generally referring to Elementary and High School Education. Regarding Early Childhood Education specifically, the existence of a common base for the curriculum was only legally foreseen in the year 2013. It is in the text of Law No. 12.796 of April 4, 2013, where the proposition of a common base for the Early Childhood Education curriculum appears. One of the gateways for this signal was Constitutional Amendment No. 59, enacted on November 11, 2009, which made the free offering of Basic Education mandatory from the age of four. To align the Law of Guidelines and Bases with Constitutional Amendment No. 59, Law No. 12.796 was approved on April 4, 2013, amending some of its articles ^[11].”

Yes, even before its elaboration, the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC) was already a subject of discussion and divided opinions. While some believed that it could contribute to aligning education, others questioned the purpose of a unified curriculum for all regions of Brazil. When the construction of this document began in 2015, it triggered a field of dispute and discontinuities throughout the process. Specifically, regarding Early Childhood Education, there were setbacks not only concerning methodology but also regarding the concepts presented between the three versions. The development of the BNCC was a complex and contentious process, with different stakeholders voicing their perspectives and

concerns, leading to changes and revisions in the document along the way.

Initially, the Ministry of Education appointed the professionals who would be part of the committee of experts to elaborate the proposal for the National Common Core Curriculum in June 2015. For Early Childhood Education, they prioritized researchers in the field, such as Zilma de Moraes Ramos de Oliveira, Maria Carmen Silveira Barbosa, Silvia Helena Vieira Cruz, and Paulo Sérgio Fochi. These were people who contributed to thinking about the construction of the Base in dialogue with the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education, taking into consideration childhood and its specific ways of educating. Thus, in September 2015, space was opened for public contributions on its portal, to allow for the participation of the population.

In April 2016, the second version of the BNCC was published, marking the beginning of the State Seminars. A total of 27 seminars were conducted, organized and coordinated by the National Council of State Secretaries of Education (CONSED) and the National Union of Municipal Education Directors (UNDIME). The purpose of these seminars was to receive relevant contributions from students, teachers, experts, coordinators, and institutions, aiming to represent society as a whole. The second version of the BNCC emphasizes plurality, starting from its cover presentation to the transparency of acknowledging the names of all professionals who contributed to its development. As the document itself points out:

“this document, the result of a broad process of debate and negotiation with different actors in the educational field and Brazilian society at large, presents the Rights and Learning and Development Objectives that should guide the development of curricula for the different stages of schooling ^[12].”

In the section concerning Early Childhood Education, in this version of the BNCC, despite possible criticisms regarding the need for a common base, it was evident that there was significant alignment with the proposals of the DCNEI. The BNCC emphasized a wide-ranging discussion on the concepts of care and education, learning rights, and fields of experiences. This alignment aimed to ensure a coherent and comprehensive approach to early childhood education in Brazil.

However, the Base suffered impacts as there was a discontinuity in the process of its development. With the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, a series of changes in the construction process began. Interlocutors from the field of Early Childhood Education who initially participated in the document’s elaboration were dismissed, making way for private sector actors, business organizations, and NGOs. This led to the deconstruction of concepts and principles, as well as weakening the connections established with the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI) up to that point. As Mota indicates, these changes resulted in significant alterations:

“One aspect that draws attention is related to the concepts. The final version of the BNCC, approved in December 2017, removed approximately 10 pages of text regarding Early Childhood Education compared to the second version. This reduction appears to be significant since the removed aspects contained relevant concepts about Early Childhood Education. This omission of pages led to a simplification of the detailed discussions about the concepts of Early Childhood Education, development, and learning ^[11].”

With these changes, the emphasis from then on shifted to competencies and skills, and learning objectives, particularly for Early Childhood Education. On April 6, 2017, the third version of the Base for Early Childhood Education and Elementary Education was presented in public hearings by region. However, this process lacked substantial discussion and active participation from researchers in the field, representatives from Basic Education, and various national organizations. Additionally, the document’s cover was altered, replacing the idea of plurality with standardized geometric blocks.

The third version was approved by the National Education Council (CNE) and endorsed by the Minister of Education, Mendonça Filho, in December 2017 through Resolution CNE/CP No. 2 of December 22, 2017, which establishes the National Common Core Curriculum throughout the national territory. The

BNCC aims to define the relevant knowledge throughout the school trajectory. According to the then Minister of Education:

“the BNCC establishes with clarity the set of essential and indispensable learning to which all students, children, young people, and adults are entitled. With it, both public and private educational networks and institutions will have a mandatory national reference for the development or adaptation of their curricula and pedagogical proposals ^[4].”

In this excerpt, we can clearly perceive the support for the rights of individuals within the neoliberal logic. The curriculum, in this sense, aims to promote a universal “adaptation” of students based on a set of minimum learning outcomes. The BNCC establishes the learning objectives to be achieved through the definition of competencies and skills. According to the document, it is the curriculum that will determine how these objectives will be achieved, allowing teachers to choose the best way to develop them. In this regard, the document presents, in its structure, 10 general competencies for all three stages of Basic Education (Early Childhood Education, Elementary Education, and High School).

In order to achieve this, these general competencies seek to ensure that students obtain social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and human development throughout their school life. The document explicitly emphasizes these competencies as a way to define essential knowledge that students must “know how to do,” as illustrated in the following passage:

“By adopting this approach, the BNCC indicates that pedagogical decisions should be oriented to the development of competencies. Through the clear indication of what students should ‘know’ (considering the constitution of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values) and, above all, what they should ‘know how to do’ (considering the mobilization of this knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to solve complex demands of everyday life, the full exercise of citizenship and the world of work), the explicitness of the competencies offers references to the strengthening of actions that ensure the essential learning defined in BNCC ^[4].”

In the Early Childhood Education stage, three strategies are adopted in the document: learning and development rights, fields of experiences, and learning and development objectives. Thus, the document briefly presents a historical discussion in the Early Childhood Education section, mentioning some laws and documents that enabled the construction of a Base for the educational field. In its final version, the connections with the DCNEI are more restricted, and two of them will be highlighted. The first one concerns the child, defined as follows:

“Historical and rights-bearing subject who, in the interactions, relationships, and daily practices they experience, constructs their personal and collective identity, plays, imagines, fantasizes, desires, learns, observes, experiments, narrates, questions, and builds meanings about nature and society, producing culture ^[4].”

The BNCC, also reaffirms the two structuring axes of the curriculum presented by DCNEI, namely, the “interactions and games”. It argues that by developing these axes it is possible to realize the “expression of affections, mediation of frustrations, conflict resolution and regulation of emotions” ^[4]. Thus, the BNCC justifies that, from this idea, we thought of six learning and development rights: living together, playing, participating, exploring, expressing and knowing oneself.

The second strategy adopted in the BNCC for Early Childhood Education is “fields of experiences.” These fields aim to articulate interactions and play, considering that, by promoting these rights through experiences, they propose learning and development. According to the document, the fields of experiences “constitute a curricular arrangement that embraces the situations and concrete experiences of children’s daily lives and their knowledge, intertwining them with the knowledge that is part of cultural heritage ^[4].” Thus, they are the knowledge and understanding that children need to develop during this stage, in each field of experience: Self, other, and us; Body, gesture, and movement; Line, sound, colors, and shapes; Listening, speaking, thinking, and imagination; Spaces, times, quantities, relationships, and transformations.

By defining these fields, the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) seeks to articulate with the third strategy, which consists of the “learning and development objectives for Early Childhood Education.” These objectives are presented by age group and systematized based on the fields of experience, outlining the essential learning that children need to acquire. To do so, the document presents 5 tables highlighting the different specificities. In this sense, the BNCC establishes that:

“in Early Childhood Education, the essential learning encompasses not only behaviors, skills, and knowledge but also experiences that promote learning and development in various fields of experience, always taking interactions and play as guiding principles. These learning objectives, therefore, constitute themselves as learning and development objectives ^[4].”

From this articulation of fields of experience with learning objectives, which are defined for each age group throughout the national territory, we can infer that the idea of fields of experience becomes weakened. The notion of a minimum curriculum becomes increasingly emphasized for this stage, creating fields of dispute, problematizations, and discussions. In this way, the BNCC establishes another governmental device by producing truths and engendering effects on the conduct of individuals, guided by a neoliberal governmentality.

Indeed, within the perspective of governmentality, the curriculum in Early Childhood Education directly and indirectly shapes subjectivity in the child population. According to Bujes (2015), the relationship between neoliberal governmentality and education is established “as a privileged device for the constitution not only of the moral subject, the reflective agent that forms this political body, but also becoming itself a laboratory of moral regulation practices ^[13].” Childhood becomes a target for this rationality and, within this framework, is seen as a long-term investment.

4. From a childhood of rights to a competent childhood

In this section, we intend to highlight how the National Curricular Guidelines for Early Childhood Education - DCNEI, and the National Common Curricular Base - BNCC, have been shaping young learners. We consider that both curriculum documents present children as subjects of rights, although we notice a shift between the DCNEI and the BNCC towards the configuration of a competent subject, which we will elaborate on throughout this section.

The National Curricular Guidelines for Early Childhood Education emphasize at various moments the concept of young learners as holders of rights. The following excerpt from the Opinion CNE/CEB No. 20/2009 affirms this by stating that:

“In line with national and international movements, a new paradigm of childcare – initiated in 1959 with the Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child and established in the country by Article 227 of the Federal Constitution of 1988 and the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (Law 8.069/90) – became a reference for social movements advocating for access to daycare centers. It guided the transition from perceiving daycare centers and preschools as a favor to socially disadvantaged individuals to understanding these spaces as a right of all children to education, regardless of their social group. The provision of daycare centers and preschools as a social right for children was realized in the 1988 Constitution, which recognized Early Childhood Education as the State’s responsibility for education, a process that involved extensive participation from community movements, women’s movements, movements advocating for the country’s democratization, as well as the efforts of education professionals themselves ^[5].”

In the excerpt above, it is evident that the document legitimizes the school space as a right for all children, the result of a process of discussion, thus expanding access to this stage. This reflects a strategy of governing the child population, as the earlier the investment in children to be in school, the less the State will have to intervene in the future. “In this logic, being outside of school, social assistance, or the job market becomes dangerous because it keeps individuals beyond the reach of the State’s actions. Being

included, therefore, means being in a condition subject to governmental action ^[14].” In this sense, the aim is to capture these individuals to reduce their future risks, make them governable, and thus, the State assumes significant responsibility from an early age for their administration. In this logic, according to Bujes:

“frequenting Early Childhood Education institutions and having access to them are seen, in this logic, as a first step towards staying in the school system, the possibility of successful progression, and the guarantee of an equality right present in the country’s legal provisions, constituting a risk reduction strategy. On the other hand, we can agree that seeking institutional shelter (ensuring inclusion) allows children to be reached by government strategies, whose purpose is to guide their behavior, which becomes possible through their participation in the educational system ^[15].”

According to the author, children’s participation in the educational system is a government strategy through the exercise of rights because “the constitution of the subject of rights is precisely what allows the State to make them governable ^[14].” The following excerpt explicates how this discourse regarding rights has been related to children, as well as the process through which childhood has undergone public policies to have the use of their citizenship supported.

“Today, children’s rights constitute the paradigm for social and political relations with childhood in the country. The Constitution of 1988, in Article 227, declares that ‘it is the duty of the family, society, and the State to ensure, with absolute priority, the rights of children and adolescents to life, health, nutrition, education, leisure, vocational training, culture, dignity, respect, freedom, and family and community coexistence, as well as protect them from all forms of negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty, and oppression.’ In this legal expression, children are inserted into the world of human rights, and not only their fundamental rights to provision (health, nutrition, leisure, education in a broad sense) and protection (against violence, discrimination, negligence, and others) are defined but also their fundamental rights to participate in social and cultural life, to be respected, and to have freedom of individual expression ^[5].”

By visualizing the considerations above, the document legitimizes that the duty of the family, the State, and society goes beyond being concerned with the health and well-being of children. Children now have the right to exercise their social function through respect for their culture, their knowledge, and their freedom of expression. In this sense, Gallo (2015, p.331) states that: “The instrumentalization of childhood, in the context of care, shifts the focus from a culture of motherhood to the use of a right to be guaranteed by the State. In this context, the child becomes, before the State, a ‘being of rights,’ that is, a citizen. ^[16]”

As contributions of the author help us understand how the public policies of the 1990s affirm the rights of childhood and thus enable a different way of looking at children. In the early forms of care for children under six years old, schools were a right for working women. As a result of struggles and conflicts, from the late 1980s, especially with the promulgation of the Federal Constitution of 1988 and the approval of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent in 1990, there is a new understanding of childhood, as the child is perceived as a subject of rights. It is in this exercise of citizenship that Gallo raises a hypothesis that in Brazil, since the 1980s, there has been a democratic governmentality, and he suggests that:

“The machinery of a democratic governmentality presupposes an organized civil society in relation to the State; an economy that regulates exchanges and ensures the power of the market, generating wealth; a population targeted by preventive actions of the State in various spheres, guaranteeing its quality of life; the State’s duty to ensure the security of this population; and, finally, the value of freedom and not submission of citizens as fundamental to this social and political organization. It is evident that in this microphysics of relationships, nothing is ideological. For example, freedom is not taken as the object of an ideological defense but as a fundamental element in the functioning of the social machine ^[16].”

In this sense, early childhood education proposed by DNCEI aims to seek an individual who progresses

through the exercise of their citizenship in the long term. In this sense, the following excerpt explains the idea of curriculum that puts children as the center of educational planning based on the configuration of rights:

“Article 4: The pedagogical proposals for Early Childhood Education should consider that the child, at the center of the curricular planning, is a historical subject with rights who, through interactions, relationships, and daily practices, constructs their personal and collective identity, plays, imagines, fantasizes, desires, learns, observes, experiments, narrates, questions, and builds meanings about nature and society, producing culture ^[3].”

This right, based on play and interactions, guided by children’s protagonism, produces a certain type of subject who exercises citizenship. In this perspective, curricula must guarantee the specificities of children through the experience of activities in Early Childhood Education institutions. As evident so far, the expression of childhood as “subjects of rights” is recurrent in the National Curricular Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI). The DCNEI constitutes a productive strategy that consolidates demands and achievements of researchers and research groups, different movements in society, such as the Forums for Early Childhood Education and the Interforums Movement for Early Childhood Education in Brazil (MIEIB).

This discourse is also reiterated in the Common National Curricular Base by advocating that Early Childhood Education institutions provide children with the means to exercise their citizenship. Initially, the BNCC aligns with DCNEI by stating that these institutions aim to expand the social repertoire of children, so they can exercise their rights, and therefore, experience their citizenship.

However, we notice a shift regarding the concept of the subject of rights expressed in the BNCC, as it begins to broaden this concept by instituting the rights of learning and development in the document, establishing the specificities that need to be ensured for children to develop and fulfill their role as citizens. In this way, the document establishes six rights, as explained in the previous section, namely: living together, playing, participating, exploring, expressing, and knowing. The six rights established by the BNCC aim to provide “conditions for children to learn in situations where they can play an active role in environments that invite them to experience challenges and feel provoked to solve them, where they can construct meanings about themselves, others, and the social and natural world ^[4].” Thus, this seems to be the link that unites the two documents regarding the concept of “subject of rights,” as both seek to legitimize young subjects as citizens.

In the BNCC, unlike what we perceive in the DCNEI, this centrality of the subject of rights takes on other contours, aligning even more with neoliberal governmentality, as now the subject needs to be invested and disposed to learn, “all of which points to the fact that governmentality is at its maximum in neoliberalism ^[17].” We can observe that in the BNCC, there is an incursion into democratic governmentality to accommodate the concept of a competent subject instituted by the document.

A BNCC promotes an emphasis on other elements, beyond the focus on the child as a subject of rights. We can then perceive the intensification of neoliberal governmentality spreading further into the educational system, associating itself with concepts such as competences and skills. In this logic, the aim is to produce a competent child subject through curricular policies, prioritizing individual life. In this general context, the Base will define that:

“Article 3 states that within the scope of the BNCC, competence is defined as the mobilization of knowledge (concepts and procedures), skills (cognitive and socio-emotional practices), attitudes, and values to address complex demands of daily life, full exercise of citizenship, and the world of work. Sole Paragraph: For the purposes of this Resolution, based on Article 35-A and Paragraph 1 of Article 36 of the LDB, the expression “competences and skills” should be considered equivalent to the expression “rights and objectives of learning” present in the National Education Plan (PNE) Law ^[6].”

According to the excerpt explained above, the BNCC defines that “competences and skills” are equivalent to “rights and objectives of learning.” However, we can perceive that the right configured here translates into the right to learn and be competent. The child still possesses rights, as this affirmation is reiterated in the BNCC. But this right shifts and assumes another connotation, as the emphasis in the BNCC is on producing individuals who need to develop specific competences and skills to be successful, reflecting the neoliberal rationality at its maximum level. Whereas in the Guidelines, it was evident that the production of an infantile subject was ensured by the right to exercise their citizenship, in a collective dimension of society, now the strategies of governance are even stronger based on competences and skills, fragmenting the social and focusing solely on the individual subject. These are the extremes of contemporary individualization processes.

Indeed, the forms of conduct of individuals are narrowed down through the document, as it establishes minimum knowledge that must be achieved from a very young age, so that they can soon enter the economic game and have the necessary resources to compete. “In this context, the ability to compete becomes of the utmost importance because, as the State becomes more entrepreneurial, the competitive games that were concentrated in business activities extend everywhere ^[17].”

As per Veiga-Neto’s contributions, the economic logic of the neoliberal State promotes the expansion of a capitalist culture to all social strata and, more specifically, advocates for the investment in human capital from early childhood. The defense of freedom becomes meaningful in people’s lives, where individuals are free to make their choices in this game of competition, although they themselves must make the best choices stipulated by this rationality. Gadelha, referring to neoliberal governmentality, highlights that:

“In this economy and market-driven perspective, its key to decoding, its principle of intelligibility, it concerns a form of governmentality that strategically seeks to program the activities and behaviors of individuals. Ultimately, it is a type of governmentality that aims to program and control how individuals act, feel, think, and position themselves in relation to themselves, the lives they lead, and the world they live in, through specific processes and policies of subjectivation: new managerial technologies in the field of administration (management), psychological practices and knowledge focused on the dynamics and management of groups and organizations, advertising, marketing, branding, self-help literature, and more. These processes and policies of subjectivation, reflecting a broader and strategic movement that makes economic (market) principles the normative principles of the entire society, transform what would be a consumer society into an enterprise society (entrepreneurial society or service society). They induce individuals to modify their perception of their choices and attitudes regarding their own lives and those of their peers, encouraging them to establish increasingly competitive relationships among themselves ^[18].”

With the emergence of capitalism, a different role for governmentality became possible. Consequently, the device of subjectivation for individuals immersed in this relationship is put into operation, allowing the governance of the population within society under a neoliberal rationality, emphasizing investment in human capital. According to Gadelha (2009), in the theory of human capital:

“the competencies, skills, and abilities of any individual constitute, in themselves, at least virtually and relatively independent of the social class to which they belong, their capital. Moreover, it is the same individual who, under this logic, sees themselves as producing their own capital, engaging in a relationship with themselves (and others) in which they recognize themselves (and others) as microenterprises. In this condition, they view themselves as entities that function under the permanent imperative of making investments in themselves - or that will yield returns in the medium and/or long term for their benefit - and generating income flows, rationally evaluating the cost/benefit relationships that their decisions entail ^[18].”

According to Gadelha (2009), this concept implies the ways of understanding the neoliberal environment and establishes new strategies of governance. The resumption of this concept, allows us to

make some approximations and relations of the neoliberal conjuncture with the contemporary curriculum policies for childhood. The BNCC further accentuates this logic by emphasizing the skills and abilities, establishing for the stage of early childhood education the learning and development goals.

“In Early Childhood Education, essential learnings encompass not only behaviors, skills, and knowledge but also experiences that promote learning and development in various fields of experience, always taking interactions and play as foundational axes. These learnings, therefore, constitute objectives for both learning and development ^[4].”

According to the excerpt provided, these learnings will produce a strategy of governmentality, which will prioritize even more individual investment in the infant population. In light of this direction towards a subject who needs to project their life for the future, certain processes of subjectivation will occur so that children become part of this economic game that neoliberal life will provide. The school is not exempt from this governmentality; on the contrary, it will be a fundamental instrument in neoliberalism to produce the desired subject through curriculum policies. As Veiga-Neto asserts:

“A question arises: in general terms, what would be the objectives of schooling in and for the neoliberal logic? To some extent, has this already been answered? To create/mold the client-subject. However, this novelty does not necessarily imply the dismissal of that great objective that guided Modernity’s schooling: as I have already mentioned, the school was conceived - and still functions - as an immense machinery of disciplinary confinement, primarily responsible for the extensive normalization of modern cities ^[17]”

Based on the reflections and problematizations presented throughout this section, we can highlight the shift from the subject of rights to the competent subject linked to these contemporary curriculum policies. In the DCNEI, we see an emphasis on children exercising their citizenship and rights. However, in the BNCC, as we have shown, these rights become broader, transforming into individual competencies that each subject must acquire. With such emphasis, in the very recent context, we are losing some rights that had been achieved over the decades, particularly since the 1990s. The BNCC is an example of this, as it establishes certain learning objectives that all children in Early Childhood Education across all regions of Brazil must achieve, moving towards a minimum curriculum for this stage of Basic Education. Consequently, local differences are excluded.

We can say, then, that currently, neoliberalism itself is reconfiguring, taking on conservative contours. In line with this context, it is pertinent to highlight the study being developed by Lockmann (2020) ^[14]. Lockmann developed another study in which she addresses this new configuration of fascist neoliberal governmentality in their text “Fascist Neoliberal Governmentality and the Right to Education.” In this article, we prefer to use the concept of conservative neoliberal governmentality as well undertaken by the author, considering that we are in the process of understanding these shifts that are still unfolding. It is important to highlight that this demonstrates how we are currently undergoing a reconfiguration regarding a displacement within the neoliberal rationality itself. According to the author, nowadays, we can observe the operation of a conservative neoliberal governmentality, as certain forms of conduct, groups, discourses, and families are prioritized at the expense of excluding others.

“So, we can consider that: On one hand, the democratic neoliberal governmentality has transformed inclusion into the ultimate rule of conduct, as everyone needed to be included to become citizens and, therefore, subjects of government actions. On the other hand, the conservative neoliberal governmentality does not make inclusion disappear; instead, it also activates exclusion as a foundation for some government practices, which are still based on the principle of rights ^[14].”

By perceiving some signs of a conservative neoliberal rationality in operation, it is possible to observe new governmentality strategies that are emerging and becoming evident in more recent public policies. Although the notion of rights does not disappear entirely, it loses strength as other conservative neoliberal premises are being shaped at this moment.

5. Final considerations

It is understood that the National Curricular Guidelines for Early Childhood Education produce discourses that configure childhood as a subject of rights for the use of its citizenship, linked to conceptions of a democratic governmentality. It is necessary to invest in childhood so that children can experience both individually and collectively play and interactions - the structuring axes of the Early Childhood Education curriculum, which also provide flexibility to teaching in this context. To make the child population thrive, it is necessary to govern children so that they learn to be autonomous, make their own choices and preferences, through their freedom. It is within this context that children are governed as they subjectify themselves with the practices established by this document, with an emphasis on childhood in the present.

In turn, the Common National Curricular Base accentuates the intensification of the neoliberal logic for the governing of childhoods. It explicitly configures the notion of a competent child subject who needs to learn certain knowledge to be able to compete. The child, in this context, becomes the target of human capital, as they need to be invested in to become and achieve the minimum individual learning expectations to put extreme neoliberalism into operation, considering the economic principles that come into play in the educational field. To make this effective, it is necessary to learn to invest in oneself, based on competencies and skills, holding the individual responsible for their own success or failure.

The document emphasizes a childhood that learns minimum knowledge to prepare for elementary education. In this sense, there is greater teacher control, by pre-establishing learning objectives that children need to achieve in a predetermined period by age group. This establishes a minimum curriculum for early childhood education, which must be present in all regions and contexts of Brazil. By moving towards curriculum standardization, it excludes the local differences of each educational institution. This is a strong connection with neoliberal governmentality. However, this connection gives us some indications that it is assuming other contours, showing itself to be extremely conservative.

Indeed, throughout this text, we have come to understand a macro-level displacement within the realm of governmentality. In this regard, we affirm that there is not just one form of neoliberalism. Neoliberal governmentality has been (re)shaping itself in a very current and recent context, transitioning towards a more conservative form. Therefore, it is essential to continue conducting studies that delve into the current scenario we are experiencing, aiming to comprehend these shifts that are being perceived within neoliberal governmentality.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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