

Early Childhood in Colombia: From Aspirations to Educational Institutional Reality

Primera Infancia en Colombia desde las Pretensiones a la Realidad Institucional Educativa

Received: November 10, 2025

Accepted: March 02, 2026

Published: April 10, 2026

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How to cite: Calderon, M. (2026). Early Childhood in Colombia: From Aspirations to Educational Institutional Reality. *Humanities, Technology and Education Journal*, 1(1), 36-48.

Retrieved from <https://ojs.unipamplona.edu.co/index.php/HUTECEDU/article/view/3736>

Abstract

Early childhood in Colombia is a highly relevant topic that has gained attention in recent years, especially within the context of the country's educational and social policies. The aims of early childhood education focus on providing comprehensive development for children from their earliest years, recognizing the importance of this stage for future learning and emotional well-being. This research is framed within the general objective of

theorizing about the convergences and divergences that arise between the aims of public educational policies and the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding early childhood at the Mario Pezzoti Educational Institution in the municipality of Los Patios, Norte de Santander. To achieve this goal, a qualitative methodology with an interpretive paradigm and phenomenological method will be employed. The aforementioned educational institution will serve as the setting, six teachers from the area will be selected as informants, and the instrument used will be the interview.

Keywords: Early childhood, institutional reality, education.

1. Introduction

One of the main objectives of educational policies in Colombia is to guarantee access to quality education for all children in early childhood. This implies not only the creation of more educational institutions but also the adequate training of teachers specialized in early childhood. Despite the stated intentions, many institutions face problems such as lack of resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of trained personnel, which limits their ability to offer an education that responds to the specific needs of the youngest children.

Educational quality is another critical aspect that deserves attention. The aspirations include not only access but also the guarantee of enriching educational experiences that foster cognitive, emotional, and social development. However, many educational institutions lack adequate curricular programs and innovative methodologies that respond to the characteristics of child development. This can result in limited educational experiences that fail to adequately stimulate children's potential.

The active participation of families in the educational process is essential for the success of learning during early childhood. However, many times educational institutions fail to establish effective links with parents or caregivers, which can lead to a disconnect between what is taught at school and what is experienced at home.

Although there are clear aspirations on the part of the Colombian State to improve education during early childhood, the institutional reality faces multiple

challenges that require urgent attention. It is essential to adopt a comprehensive approach that considers not only educational aspects but also contextual and social ones to guarantee optimal development for all children in the country.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework acts as an essential tool that provides the necessary foundations for a comprehensive understanding of public policies within the framework of early childhood education. Through the analysis, synthesis, and organization of relevant theories, models, and concepts, the researcher can build a solid foundation to support her work.

Diachronic overview of the object of study

The term "childhood" has an etymological and historical meaning that reveals much about how children have been perceived over time. Derived from the Latin "infans," meaning "the one who does not speak," this term reflects an initial conception that associated children with the inability to communicate verbally. This limitation in oral expression was interpreted as a justification for their exclusion from certain social and political spheres, resulting in a view of infants as dependent beings who needed to be guided and protected by adults. This perspective contributed to their invisibility within social structures, relegating them to a secondary role in society.

Early childhood and education

Early childhood, which spans from birth to entry into primary school, is recognized as a crucial stage in human development. During these formative years, the foundations for future growth and learning are established. This period is fundamental for the construction of identity and the ability to interact with the environment, which underscores the need to pay attention to the experiences that children have during these years.

From the perspective of neuroscience, according to Díaz Barriga (2019), it has been demonstrated that the first years are a "critical period" for brain development. During this time, neural connections form at an unprecedented rate.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund, Children in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNICEF) (2020), early childhood education (ECE) is presented as a fundamental pillar for addressing the learning crisis that many educational systems face worldwide. This stage not only focuses on the academic preparation of children but also encompasses their comprehensive development, including emotional, social, and cognitive aspects.

Theory of social conceptions

The idea that the essence of representations is formed through everyday communications highlights the importance of the social context in which they develop. In our daily lives, we are constantly exposed

to a flow of information that influences our perceptions and beliefs. This communicative exchange not only allows

the circulation of ideas but also establishes a framework of trust among individuals, based on coherence and mutual understanding. Thus, representations are not merely individual; they are social constructions that emerge from constant interaction with others, which underscores their dynamic and contextual nature.

The communicative process, according to Jodelet (1986), is fundamental for the derivation of conceptions within representations. Through dialogue and the exchange of information, subjects not only share knowledge but also negotiate meanings and construct common understandings.

According to Jodelet (1986), the analysis of representations from this perspective reveals their central role in the construction of social knowledge. Through everyday communicative exchange, individuals develop shared conceptions that allow them to interact with their environment effectively.

This approach proposes three dimensions of analysis that are fundamental for understanding the communicative process: information, the field of representation, and attitude. The first dimension, related to information, refers to what is said and circulated, especially through the media. In this sense, the media play a crucial role in the dissemination of ideas and in the formation of collective perceptions. The way information is presented can significantly influence how certain social phenomena are interpreted, establishing

narratives that can be accepted or questioned by the public.

The second dimension, the field of representation, addresses how information is structured and which elements are considered essential, secondary, or disposable. This structure is not arbitrary; it reflects cultural and social values that determine which aspects of a reality are highlighted and which are ignored. Finally, the third dimension is attitude, which is intimately related to everyday experiences and to the positive or negative positions toward the object of representation. Attitudes do not arise in a vacuum; they are shaped by previous interactions and by the social context in which individuals find themselves. As people participate in collective dialogues about relevant topics, their attitudes can change or be reinforced. This implies that representations not only reflect existing realities but also have the potential to transform perceptions and behaviors through social dialogue.

Anchoring also highlights the importance of everyday conversations in the formation of collective representations. As people discuss and share their experiences on a given topic, a dynamic exchange of meanings occurs that contributes to the collective construction of knowledge. This process is not linear; rather, it is a continuous flow where new information is constantly evaluated and reinterpreted through the prism of past experiences.

Furthermore, the fact that anchoring involves analogies suggests that our minds tend to seek patterns and similarities as a

natural way of processing new information. In this sense, anchoring acts as a bridge between the familiar and the unknown, thus enriching the group's cultural heritage.

Public policies in education

Public policy, as defined by Vegas (2009), is presented as a set of actions and activities that are developed within a normative and regulatory framework. This approach highlights the importance of the legal structures that guide the implementation of policies, ensuring that these are not only effective but also legitimate. Legality is a fundamental pillar, as it provides the necessary backing for the State's actions to be accepted by society. Without this legal framework, interventions could be perceived as arbitrary or unjust, which could generate distrust and resistance from citizens.

The interaction among these three elements—legality, understanding of the problem, and attention to social pressure—is fundamental for the successful design and implementation of public policies. When a balance among them is achieved, more inclusive and effective strategies can be developed that truly address collective needs.

Curricular foundations of the Colombian educational system for early childhood

The assertion that children are subjects of rights from early childhood implies a fundamental recognition of their social and active nature. From the beginning of their

lives, children are not mere passive recipients of care and education, but individuals with inherent capacities that allow them to interact with their environment and participate in social life.

This perspective challenges traditional views that consider children as objects of protection, emphasizing instead their role as active agents in the construction of their own experiences and learning.

3. Methodology

The qualitative approach proposed by Martínez Miguelez (2006) offers essential tools for exploring the complexity of educational processes. This approach focuses on understanding phenomena from the participants' perspective, which is crucial in a field as human and diverse as education. In the educational field, this implies an in-depth study of how students, teachers, and other educational actors experience and make sense of their daily interactions.

The interpretive paradigm is based on the idea that reality is subjective and contextual, and that researchers must immerse themselves in the world of participants to understand it from their point of view. In this way, this research will be oriented with the main objective being the understanding of meanings and the interpretation of social phenomena, based on individual perspectives and experiences, and how these influence the way people interrelate and construct social reality, with the aim of constructing theories based on the elements that emerge from the research

process.

Based on the approach and the paradigm, this study will be carried out under a phenomenological method, which will allow the understanding of each of the aspects from the general to the specific.

Phenomenological research, as proposed by

Heidegger (2009), is articulated in three fundamental phases: reduction, deconstruction, and construction.

The reduction phase involves a conscious effort on the part of the researcher to suspend prior judgments and prejudices, thus allowing lived experiences to present themselves in their purest form.

The deconstruction phase. In this phase, the researcher examines the underlying structures that shape human experiences. This involves a critical analysis of the meanings and interpretations that have been socially constructed over time.

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Together, these three phases of the development of phenomenological research propose a rigorous and reflective approach to exploring human experience.

Setting

The research setting refers to the context where a research study takes place. This setting can include physical, social, cultural, economic, and technological aspects that surround and affect the development of the research. According to

Pérez (2016), the setting provides the frame of reference for data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the results obtained. It includes, but is not limited to, educational institutions or virtual environments.

Key informants

Identifying and working with key informants is an essential strategy that deepens the understanding of the culture and internal dynamics of educational contexts. In this regard, Pérez (2016) points out that key informants are individuals within a group or community who possess significant and relevant knowledge, experiences, or perspectives regarding the topics of interest of the research.

In light of this, a series of essential characteristics of key informants are specified:

Expert knowledge: Key informants usually have a deep knowledge of the topic under study due to their experience or position within the organization or community. In an educational context, they could be teachers with years of experience, school administrators, or students who occupy leadership roles.

Accessibility: In addition to their knowledge, these informants are accessible and willing to participate in the research. Their willingness to share information openly and reflectively is crucial for the depth and quality of the analysis.

Strategic position: Key informants often occupy positions that provide them with a unique view of the structure and processes

of the educational environment. This does not necessarily imply a position of formal power, but rather a strategic location from which they observe and participate in relevant dynamics.

In this regard, the selection of key informants must be a deliberate and strategic process. It begins with the identification of desired characteristics based on the research objectives and then proceeds to establish contacts and evaluate the willingness and capacity of potential informants to contribute significantly to the study.

Table 1. Coding of key informants

Informante	Código
Docente 1	<i>DIV1</i>
Docente 2	<i>DIV2</i>
Docente 3	<i>DIV3</i>
Docente 4	<i>DIV4</i>
Docente 5	<i>DIV5</i>
Docente 6	<i>DIV6</i>

Technique and instruments

The choice of the semi-structured interview as a technique for collecting information in research is particularly appropriate, given its focus on direct interaction between the researcher and the participants. According to Gurdían (2010), this technique is characterized by establishing a "subject-subject" relationship, which promotes a more natural and fluid conversational atmosphere. This dynamic allows informants to feel comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives, which can result in richer and more nuanced data.

The method proposed by Martínez (2006) for the processing and analysis of information is presented as a systematic and rigorous approach that allows breaking down and understanding the data obtained

through semi-structured interviews. The first stage, categorization, is fundamental, as it establishes the foundations for analysis by classifying and coding the content of the responses. This process not only helps identify the central ideas of each thematic unit but also allows the creation of subcategories that provide greater descriptive depth.

The second stage, structuring, takes this process a step further by integrating the categories into a "grand category" that acts as the central axis of the analysis. This phase is crucial because it not only organizes the information logically but also allows establishing connections between the different categories and relating them to existing theories.

Finally, the third stage, contrasting or triangulation, is essential for validating the results obtained. By comparing the findings with previous antecedents and theoretical bases, a broader integration of existing knowledge in the area of study is achieved. This process not only identifies similarities and differences between the new data and existing literature but also enriches the analysis by offering multiple perspectives on the investigated phenomenon. Triangulation strengthens the credibility of the study by demonstrating how the results align with or challenge previous theories.

Validity and reliability

Validity, as Martínez (2006) points out, is fundamental in research, as it refers to the ability of a study to accurately and

representatively reflect a reality. This implies that the research results must be coherent and consistent with what is intended to be studied.

Triangulation, as a method proposed by Rodríguez, Gil, and García (1996), is presented as an effective strategy for integrating and contrasting different perspectives within the study.

By focusing on consensus among participants, this technique allows building a more complete and detailed vision of early childhood education.

Rigor criteria

In research, it is fundamental to ensure that phenomenological studies meet certain rigor criteria to guarantee the quality and credibility of the findings. Below, I outline the essential rigor criteria for phenomenological research in the educational context.

1. **Credibility:** This criterion refers to the plausibility of the findings from the perspective of the study participants. To ensure credibility, the researcher must carry out a prolonged immersion in the field, which allows a deep understanding of the culture and educational practices.
2. **Transferability:** Although direct generalization is not the objective of qualitative research, transferability allows other researchers to see the applicability of the findings in other similar contexts. To facilitate transferability, the researcher must

provide a dense and detailed description of the investigated context and of the data collection and analysis processes.

3. **Dependability:** Dependability in phenomenological research implies that the study results are consistent and could be replicable under similar conditions. To strengthen dependability, the researcher must document the research process exhaustively,
4. including how methodological decisions were made and how changes in the study were handled.
5. **Confirmability:** This criterion focuses on the objectivity and neutrality of the researcher. Confirmability seeks to ensure that the study findings are determined by the subjects and the conditions of the study and not by the researcher's predispositions.

4. Results / Theoretical Construct

The theorization process is essential for transforming collected data into meaningful knowledge. Through this process, the researcher articulates their findings with existing theories or develops new perspectives that better explain the studied phenomena.

Convergences and divergences that arise between the aspirations of public educational policies and the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding early childhood

The Intersectoral Commission for Early

Childhood (2012) and Decree 1075 of 2015 represent fundamental normative frameworks in public educational policy in Colombia, aimed at guaranteeing the comprehensive development of children in their first years. The former seeks to promote an intersectoral approach that articulates health, education, social protection, and nutrition, with an emphasis on rights and early care. The decree, for its part, regulates the organization of the educational sector, establishing the structure of preschool education and its mandatory nature. Both instruments reflect an intention to strengthen the conditions for children to access adequate care from their earliest days, promoting equality and social inclusion.

An important convergence lies in the recognition of the value of early childhood as a fundamental stage for the country's future. Both policies and teachers agree that it is necessary to provide specialized care and promote stimulating environments for young children. Furthermore, there is agreement that family and community participation is essential to enhance learning processes and child well-being. However, these coincidences are often limited by the structural conditions of the educational system and the available professional capacities.

In light of this, Law 1804 of 2016:

"By which the State policy for the Comprehensive Development of Early Childhood From Zero to Forever is established and other provisions are issued," has the purpose of establishing the State Policy for the Comprehensive Development of Early Childhood "From Zero to Forever," which lays the

conceptual, technical, and management foundations to guarantee comprehensive development (p. 11).

On the other hand, significant divergences emerge regarding the perceptions that teachers have about their role in early childhood; many still consider their function primarily as transmitters of academic knowledge or basic recreational activities, without fully understanding the holistic approach promoted by current public policies.

Another important divergence is related to institutional expectations versus available resources. While public policies propose an ideal framework of comprehensive care with adequate resources, many teachers face budget limitations, deficient infrastructure, or lack of appropriate teaching materials. This generates a gap between what is intended from policies and what actually happens in classrooms, affecting the quality of care and the fulfillment of children's rights.

Regarding social perceptions about early childhood, a limited vision persists that associates this stage solely with care or basic assistance rather than with complex educational processes. This perception influences how teachers value their work.

For this reason, both public policies and teacher perceptions must converge toward a shared vision where early childhood is recognized as a key period for building full citizenship from the earliest years. The effective articulation between regulations and professional perceptions will facilitate pedagogical practices more coherent with

children's rights and will contribute to reducing existing social gaps. Only through this dialogue between policy and social imagination will it be possible to advance toward an inclusive, respectful, and transformative early childhood education.

5. Conclusions

The characterization of conceptions and beliefs about the institutionalization of early childhood in the social perceptions of teachers reveals a series of tensions and challenges that directly impact the quality and relevance of the care offered to young children. First, it is observed that many teachers maintain traditional perceptions centered on a limited vision of the educational role, where practices based on the transmission of knowledge and superficial recreational activities predominate, leaving aside holistic approaches and human rights that promote comprehensive development. This evidences a resistance to change and to the incorporation of new pedagogies grounded in respect for childhood as an active subject.

From a critical analysis, it is also evident that the social perceptions of teachers are conditioned by social and cultural expectations regarding their role, where an assistentialist or reproductive vision of child care predominates rather than a transformative educational perspective. This reinforces practices that do not foster autonomy or child protagonism, perpetuating outdated pedagogical models and limiting the possibilities for pedagogical innovation.

Likewise, the social perceptions of teachers reflect a vision in which

educational institutions are seen primarily as places of care and protection rather than as spaces for active and participatory learning. This is related to deep-rooted beliefs about the role of the teacher as a caregiver and not necessarily as a facilitator of innovative or transformative pedagogical processes. The assessment of these institutional realities is conditioned by the lack of continuous training, insufficient institutional support, and public policies that do not always consider the particularities of the local context, which limits their capacity to transform those conditions.

From theories on educational governance, it can be argued that there is a dialectical process between normative aspirations (which represent the State and its agendas) and social perceptions (which reflect the everyday perceptions of the actors). The effectiveness of said policies depends largely on how they are interpreted and internalized by teachers and administrators; when there is significant divergence without adequate mediation, resistance is generated.

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Author's or authors' declaration on the use of LLM

This article has not used texts generated by an LLM (ChatGPT or others) in its writing.

Funding

This work has not received any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.