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The effects of the Pandemic on Early Childhood Education in the State of Paraíba/PB

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Abstract: This article analyzes the possible effects of the pandemic on educational service indicators for children aged 0 to 5 years and the achievement of Goal 1 of the National Education Plan (PNE/2014/2024) considering the years 2019 to 2022 as a time frame, between 2019 and 2022, a critical period of the health crisis. This is a research, with a quantitative-qualitative approach, using documentary analysis as both its methodological strategy and investigation technique. The School Census reports from INEP/MEC and the IBGE Census, as well as the National Education Plan, the State Education Plan (PEE/2015–2025), and the Municipal Education Plans (PMEs) of Paraíba were considered as research sources. The results indicate that the pandemic significantly affected enrollment in Early Childhood Education (EI), especially among non-white children, those living in rural areas, those on low incomes and in vulnerable situations. This impact led to setbacks in the universalization of preschool and the expansion of daycare services, compromising the achievement of Goal 1 of the Municipal, State, and National Education Plans. The critical analysis of the data reveals the need for more robust and equitable public policies to ensure the right to Early Childhood Education, particularly for children living in rural areas.

Keywords: early childhood education; pandemic; education plans; goal 1: service.

1 Introduction

The National Education Plan (PNE) 2014-2024, established by Law No. 13,005/2014, with a term until 2024, was extended until December 31, 2025, by Law No. 14,934/2024, without Goal 1, which addresses Early Childhood Education (EI), having been met. This goal specifically directs attention to the universalization of access to early childhood education for children in the preschool phase, that is, those aged 4 and 5 years. Furthermore, it seeks a 50% increase in educational opportunities offered in daycare centers, aimed at children from 0 to 3 years old. Thus, we can affirm

that this goal is intrinsically linked to the number of school enrollments in our country (Brazil, 2014).

One of the reasons to be considered in the study of the failure to reach Goal 1 is the coronavirus pandemic, caused by Covid-19. The coronavirus showed rapid contagion, most often asymptomatic; however, in many cases, the infected died. To illustrate the magnitude of the crisis, by December 2022, Brazil had already recorded more than 693,813 deaths resulting from Covid-19[1]. Thus, the period between December 2019 and April 2022 was marked by one of the worst crises humanity has faced in the 21st century, triggered by Covid-19. Only in April 2022 did the Ministry of Health declare the end of the Public Health Emergency of National Importance (ESPIN) related to Covid-19, a decision based on the significant reduction in the number of victims and the extensive vaccination coverage achieved. After all, the Federal Government had already distributed more than 487 million vaccine doses, resulting in more than 80% of the Brazilian population with at least the first dose and more than 74 million with the booster dose. However, it is crucial to highlight that this was the official death count, and the actual number of deaths may be even higher, considering the possible underreporting of cases and the difficulty of diagnosis in some regions. Furthermore, the end of the ESPIN does not mean the disappearance of Covid-19.

The aforementioned pandemic brought changes to all dimensions of human life, worldwide, mainly due to the measures for containment and control of the contagion defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) and by governmental bodies and instances, such as social isolation and the closure of commercial, religious, and educational establishments. Particularly in the field of education, the impact was immeasurable, as it meant the suspension of in-person classes and the adoption of remote classes, the use of printed activities and digital media such as WhatsApp, Meet, Classroom, YouTube, among others.

However, we emphasize that the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were very significant for children under 7 years of age (Linhares; Enumo, 2020; Silva; Feitosa, 2022; Cordeiro et al., 2024), particularly for those who attended Early Childhood Education (EI) at the time (Campos; Vieira, 2021; Santos; Correia, 2021). EI plays a

[1] Consult the Ministry of Health's Coronavirus Panel. Available at: https://covid.saude.gov.br/; https://infoms.saude.gov.br/extensions/covid-19_html/covid-19_html.htmL. Accessed on: Jan. 10, 2025.

crucial role in the physical, cognitive, and socio-affective development of children, in addition to being a policy and social protection system for the young child, as it guarantees food security, protection, and the right to play (Santos; Correia, 2021). As a result, the closure of these institutions considerably increased the risks of food insecurity, violence, and child neglect, in addition to negatively impacting the integral development of children. Concerning families, especially women, the closure of schools represented a significant obstacle to their insertion and maintenance in the labor market, compromising their remuneration and the opportunity to establish formal contracts (Santos; Correia, 2021).

It is important to remember that more than 70% of EI services in Brazil occur in the public municipal networks, where the vast majority of children belong to the poorest quintiles of the population. To give an idea, according to the IBGE's Synthesis of Social Indicators (2023a), in 2022, 49.1% of children up to 14 years of age were poor, and 10.0% lived in extreme poverty; 40.0% of people of black or mixed race were poor, and 72.2% of the household arrangement of black or mixed-race women with children under 14 and without a spouse were poor, and 22.6% were extremely poor.

Given this panorama, all these situations converge to the conclusion that children and their childhoods were the most impacted by poverty and extreme poverty, with particular emphasis on girls and non-white children. Consequently, they were also the most affected by the consequences of the pandemic, which reinforces and reaffirms the crucial role and importance of Early Childhood Education (EI) for this group (Linhares; Enumo, 2020; Silva; Feitosa, 2022; Cordeiro *et al*., 2024). Thus, we direct our focus to discuss the reflections of the pandemic on early childhood children (0 to 5 years), who have or should have the right to EI guaranteed. In this sense, the present article proposes to analyze the possible reflections of the pandemic on the educational services for children aged 0 to 5 and on the achievement of Goal 1 of the National Education Plan (PNE/2014-2024) in the State of Paraíba, in the period between 2019 and 2022.

In the scenario of public policies aimed at Brazilian education, the PNE assumes a prominent role, especially concerning Early Childhood Education. This is because it is "[...] a document that defines collaborative commitments between the federative entities" (Brazil, 2015, p. 11), aiming for the advancement of education nationwide, configuring itself as "[...] a fundamental landmark for public policies" (Brazil, 2015, p.

9), as well as "[...] one of the pillars around which public policies in the area of education are built" (Dourado, 2016, p. 8). Additionally, the PNE establishes itself as a commitment to reducing the existing inequalities in the country (Brazil, 2014).

The PNE is considered the epicenter of Brazilian educational policies because its construction is the result of a democratic diagnosis and planning process, conducted by civil society and in favor of improving public education in all municipalities and states of the country, especially concerning access, equity, and quality. Furthermore, the PNE stands out for proposing objectives and goals built from a systemic and participatory process. Moreover, its articulation with the State and Municipal Education Plans, as a mandatory national document, demonstrates its fundamental role in organizing, ensuring, and developing education in all regions of the country.

The PNE 2014-2024 established 20 goals and 254 strategies for Brazilian education. Goal 1, focused on Early Childhood Education, aimed to universalize educational services for children aged 4 to 5 in preschool by 2016 and to expand the supply of daycare centers for at least 50% of children up to 3 years old by 2024. However, at the end of its term, about 90% of the PNE's goals had not been met, a reality that is still repeated in the state and municipal plans. This situation seems likely to persist until the end of 2025, even with the extension of the PNE's validity. Among the factors that contributed to this scenario, we highlight the Covid-19 pandemic, whose global impacts on daily life and education cannot yet be fully measured.

Therefore, to meet the objectives proposed for the investigation and study, we opted for a quantitative-qualitative approach, as we are dealing with a "complex and multifaceted human phenomenon," and in these situations, whenever possible, "[...] it is essential to use various research instruments and strategies" (Santos, 2015, p. 37; Santos Filho; Gamboa, 2002). The choice of this methodology is justified by the nature of the topic, which demands the articulation of quantitative and qualitative approaches. We use quantification in both data collection and processing, through statistics from official sources, such as the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) and the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP). These quantitative data (such as enrollment numbers and population information) were supplemented by qualitative data, essential for an in-depth understanding of the

various manifestations and contexts of the phenomenon under study (Santos Filho; Gamboa, 2002; Souza; Kerbauy, 2017).

Furthermore, documentary analysis is our methodological and technical research strategy. We believe that this approach will help us in the in-depth understanding of our object of study, as we recognize the intrinsic importance of all documents, albeit at different levels of specificity. In addition, they carry with them historical determinations that manifest in the very essence of the documentary corpus, acting as witnesses and bearing traces of events that occurred in the recent past (Cellard, 2012; Evangelista, 2012). Among the documents we examined as primary sources, the National Education Plan 2014-2024, the State Education Plan (PEE) of Paraíba, and the Municipal Education Plans (PMEs) of Paraíba stand out, and for the present research, our analysis focused on Goal 1 of these plans. The research for the analysis of the Municipal Education Plans (PMEs) of Paraíba involved collecting the documents from the 223 municipalities on the "PNE em Movimento" portal, which provides information on the PNE and the PMEs. On this portal, the plans of all Brazilian states and municipalities that have been submitted are available, as well as their corresponding monitoring and evaluation reports. In addition, the platform offers data at the national level, diverse information about the plans, an overview of the status of the goals, and various indicators with national, regional, state, and municipal coverage.

With these collected documents in hand, we observed the presentation format and readability of the files, in addition to identifying cases of absence or incompleteness, based on the guidelines found in the document "The Municipal Education Plan - Guidance Notebook" ("O Plano Municipal de Educação - Caderno de Orientações"), written by the Ministry of Education (MEC) to assist states and municipalities in the construction of their plans.

The subsequent analysis focused on extracting and comparing the goals established for daycare services and for the universalization of preschool, verifying adherence to the parameters of the National Education Plan (PNE) and the State Plan, as well as the deadlines defined for universalization. Additionally, we sought to identify changes in the goals, the monitoring and evaluation status of the plans, the presence of a municipal diagnosis and characterization, and the characteristics of the proposed strategies, including the variety and occurrence of repetitions.

These aspects and pieces of information were valuable for understanding the complexity inherent in the plans and their respective goals, although they will not be explored in depth at this time as they fall within a broader research scope.[2]. The purpose of this section is to aid in the contextualization and understanding of Goal 1 in the state of Paraíba. However, for the purposes of this study, the service indicators are the main focus of our observation, considering that we are analyzing the possible impacts of the pandemic period, more precisely between the years 2019 and 2022, on the achievement of the aforementioned Goal.

As secondary sources, we listed the official reports and documents from the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP), the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), as well as the National Education Plan, the State Education Plan (PEE/2015-2025), and the Municipal Education Plans.

For this analysis, we defined the time frame between the years 2019 and 2022, a period that covers the most critical phase of the pandemic. However, it is important to note that some data, particularly those from censuses, fall outside this time frame due to their methodological particularities, such as the statistical population count, which has a decennial frequency. In this regard, it is worth remembering that the 2020 Demographic Census was actually carried out only in 2022, due to the impacts of the pandemic[3].

Another point that needs to be observed concerns the age range of children in Early Childhood Education, according to legal terms; because until the establishment of Law No. 11,274, of February 6, 2006, this stage was from 0 to 6 years old, and only with the mandatory enrollment of 6-year-old children in Elementary Education (EF), did EI come to have an age range up to five years old. For our research, it is important to remember this fact, since documents, research, and texts may refer to EI as being from 0 to 6 years old. Some statistical data also follow this logic.

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[2] Research projects “Financing of Early Childhood Education in Paraíba: a study on supply conditions and investment profile” and “GOAL 1 OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATION PLAN (PNE 2014-2024) AND THE PROVISION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN PARAÍBA” Linked to the Education Unit (UEAD) and the Graduate Program in Education (PPGEd) of the Federal University of Campina Grande (UFCG).

[3] It is worth noting that age group data also have specificities in their collection and availability processes. For example, in the School Census, Early Childhood Education data cover the 0 to 5 age range, while in the Demographic Census, population data are presented for 0 to 6 years.

The State of Paraíba was chosen as the locus of our research, taking into consideration that it is the location where the proponents are developing two other larger research projects that involve the State of Paraíba. With this information in hand and in light of authors such as Macedo (2020), Coutinho and Côco (2020), Santos and Correia (2021), Cruz, Martins and Cruz (2021), and Koslinski and Bartholo (2021), we analyzed the possible impacts of the pandemic on the educational services for children aged 0 to 5 and on the achievement of Goal 1 of the National Education Plan.

2 The effects of the pandemic on Early Childhood Education and the fulfillment of Goal 1

The Covid-19 pandemic triggered a series of impacts, both direct and indirect, on the care and education of children aged 0 to 5 in Early Childhood Education (EI). These impacts touched upon pedagogical, organizational, and educational management aspects, as well as health and, significantly, the emotional dimensions for both children and teachers. During this challenging period, children and their families faced difficulties in adapting to remote learning, especially concerning the appropriation of and access to digital technologies. Many experienced the fear of viral contagion, the pain of losing loved ones, the alarming increase in cases of domestic violence, and the deprivation of social interaction with other children—issues that undeniably affected children's mental health. Simultaneously, teachers had to deal with the abrupt transition to remote teaching, the lack of adequate resources, and the exacerbation of stress resulting from work overload.

In this context, numerous studies, research projects, and texts have been produced and published to address these challenges (Macedo, 2020; Coutinho; Côco, 2020; Santos; Correia, 2021; Cruz; Martins; Cruz, 2021; Mello, 2022); however, the focus of this article is particularly on the service indicators for EI during the pandemic period.

We can affirm that the suspension of classes in the context of the pandemic, as pointed out by Coutinho and Côco (2020), resulted in problems that required governmental decision-making, which neither prioritized nor considered the child as a subject of rights, leading to several questions regarding the guarantee of the right to education (Coutinho; Côco, 2020). In this direction, various sectors of civil society, including parents, educators, and child rights specialists, warned of the potential long-

term damage of this approach. By not considering the child and their specific needs, the measures adopted generally ignored the needs for multiple interactions, play, and aspects that consider their integral development. Such aspects have negative effects on emotional well-being and on the processes of learning and development. At the same time, this negligence highlighted the lack of dialogue with the social actors who constitute Early Childhood Education (EI) in Brazil, as well as the absence of effective strategies to ensure minimum conditions for development and learning, especially for children in situations of social vulnerability.

The unplanned social isolation and the migration to the use of digital media, without considering the specificities of EI, its authors and subjects, the inequalities, and the needs of children and their families, caused controversies. Many families, with their children and youth, did not have access to technological devices or the internet, even with assistance policies later implemented—which were insufficient to meet the demand. Similarly, many teachers, schools, and school networks faced the reality of a lack of adequate preparation, insufficient resources, and precarious access to technological devices and the internet.

For EI (0 to 5 years), the situation was even more critical, as this stage requires constant interaction, in addition to care, nutrition, protection, and educational and pedagogical practices based on caring, playing, and physical interaction—elements incompatible with the virtual environment. As Santos and Correia (2021, p. 196) highlight, EI is the space that

> [...] ensures children's physical, cognitive, and socio-affective development, through play and interactions produced in the concrete reality of daily life" while it is also a social policy for the protection of children "that guarantees food security, protection, the right to play, and multiple interactions.[4]

As Silva, Pereira, and Ribeiro (2022, p. 1384) point out, Early Childhood Education institutions found themselves facing the need to "[...] develop practices of care and education without physical presence as an imperative for health protection [...]", while simultaneously needing to defend the foundational principles of the field, namely: "[...] the ethics of otherness, the pedagogy of contact, of listening, of coexistence, and of sharing experiences [...]" (Silva; Pereira; Ribeiro, 2022, p. 1385).

[4] This quotation, as well as all the others, was freely translated into English from Portuguese.

Furthermore, children in this age group are entirely dependent on adults to mediate pedagogical activities, which presupposes the availability of family members – not always possible due to work-related issues. Other challenges included the lack of adequate spaces in homes (Macedo, 2020) and exposure to risks such as domestic violence and viral contagion (for families who could not adhere to isolation). The closure of Early Childhood Education (EI) spaces and the deprivation of this right led to the amplification of significant risks. For example, an increased exposure of children to food insecurity, violence, and neglect was observed (Santos; Correia, 2021).

Therefore, according to Cruz, Martins, and Cruz (2021), the actions developed for EI should be intersectoral (Education, Social Assistance, and Health) to ensure the principles, knowledge, and values constructed and already established in the field of childhood studies and EI legislation. These actions must always be committed to quality education, which, in turn, must consider the specificities of these subjects.

It is worth noting that, according to the Law of Directives and Bases of National Education (LDB) (Brazil, 1996), EI could not take place through Distance Education (EaD), an aspect that was denounced and problematized by the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in Education (Anped) and by the Inter-forum Movement of Early Childhood Education of Brazil (MIEIB) (Santos; Correia, 2021). Nevertheless, the fact that one "[...] advocates for the inadequacy of the proposal of EaD in Early Childhood Education does not mean affirming its interruption [...]", as pertinently pointed out by Coutinho and Côco (2020, p. 7). In this sense, the strategic use of digital media and resources, as well as other diversified means, proved relevant in that context to ensure continuous dialogue with families, attentive listening, and interaction with the children's daily lives, in addition to promoting the exchange of information, sharing of knowledge, and monitoring of their experiences. However, it was essential to establish sensitive listening and open dialogue between the educational institution and the family, aiming for adequate and careful pedagogical planning. Such coordination was necessary to effectively guarantee the right to education and care for the children, families, and professionals who worked in this crucial stage of education.

The context of the health crisis during the pandemic also unfolded into various concerns and threats, such as those related to the food and nutritional security of the most vulnerable populations, including poor, non-white children, and those from rural

areas, waters, and forests. In the case of EI, many children depended on school meals as their main source of nutrition, and in response, Law No. 13,987/2020 guaranteed the distribution of food for school meals from the public basic education network to parents or guardians during the pandemic. Despite this initiative, the Ministry of Education (MEC) warned of risks such as learning setbacks, social harm to low-income families, and an increase in school dropout rates (Brazil, 2021), due to the prolonged closure of educational institutions.

Another notable and challenging aspect is the decrease in enrollments, whether due to abandonment, withdrawal, deferment, or the impossibility of following remote activities or physical distance, among other factors. This occurrence represents, in itself, a substantial weakening of this protection system, of this public educational policy, and, above all, of this fundamental right and this crucial stage of Brazilian education. Consequently, this reduction further complicates the expansion of the right to Early Childhood Education (EI), both concerning the expansion of daycare availability and the universalization of preschool, thus reflecting in the non-fulfillment of Goal 1 of the Municipal Education Plans (PME) and, consequently, of the State Education Plan (PEE) and the National Education Plan (PNE).

The final document of the National Education Conference - Conae 2024, for example, asserts that the effects of the pandemic may be even more significant. However, a precise analysis proves to be unfeasible, given that data for the 0 to 5-year-old population, referring to the years 2020 and 2021, were not collected by IBGE. The said document points out that in 2019, the percentage indicator of inequality in daycare access between children belonging to the 20% wealthiest families and those from the 20% poorest families of the 0 to 3-year-old population reached the mark of 27.3%, a value considerably higher than the 10% limit established in Strategy 1.2 of the PNE. Furthermore, for the effective materialization of Goal 1 of the Plan, it would be essential to include "about 1.4 million children aged 0 to 3 in daycare centers and approximately 300,000 children aged 4 to 5 in preschool" (CONAE, 2024).

In 2022, the disparity in daycare access between poorer and richer children remained concerning. Among the poorest 20%, the access rate was 28.2%, while among the richest 20% it reached 53.6%, almost double. Regarding preschool, coverage reached 93%, a level below the established goal and a decrease of 1

percentage point compared to 2019. The document in question points to the pandemic's influence on the stagnation of Indicator B, referring to daycare expansion, and on the setback of Indicator A, related to preschool universalization (CONAE, 2024). Given this national scenario, the following question emerges: were the effects similar on the provision of Early Childhood Education in Paraíba?

3 Paraíba and the effects of the pandemic on Early Childhood Education

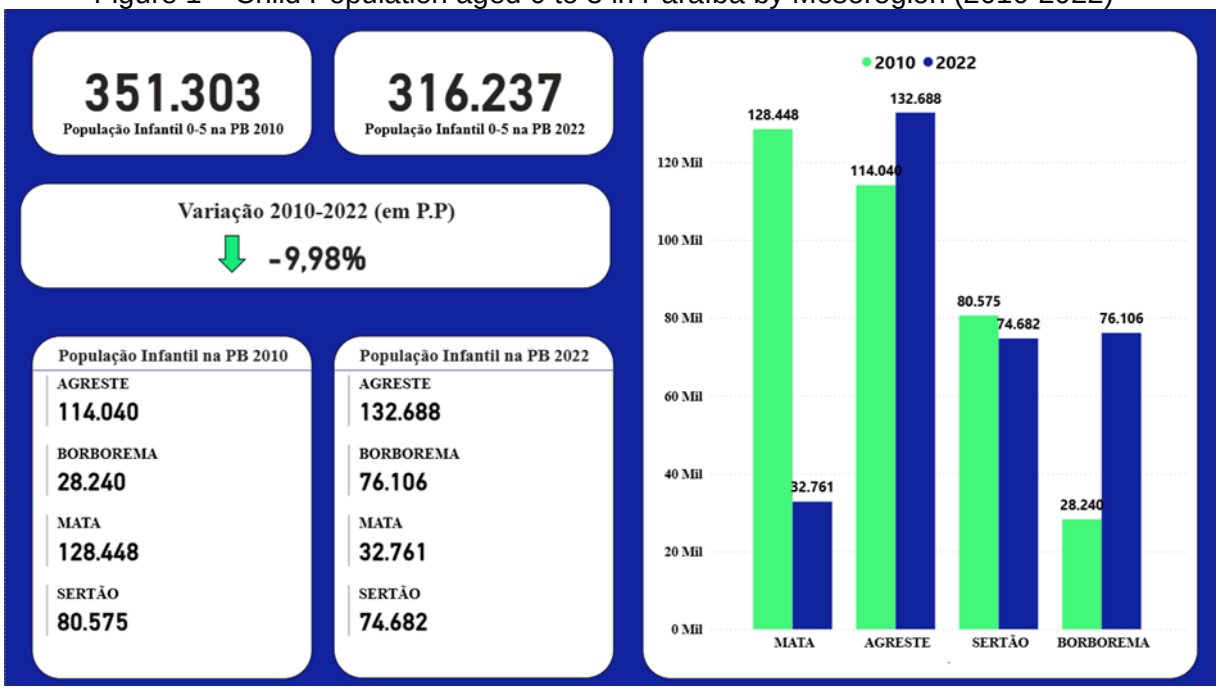
The State of Paraíba is divided into 4 mesoregions, named according to the classification established by IBGE: Mata Paraibana, Agreste Paraibano, Borborema, and Sertão Paraibano. These mesoregions are subdivided into twenty-three microregions, where its 223 municipalities are distributed, which have specificities regarding their economic activities, structure of agricultural production, industry, mineral and fishing extraction, commerce, services, and tourism. Such peculiarities may also result from natural factors, such as relief, climate, or typical social and economic relations, among others (IBGE, 2023a). With a territorial area of 56,467.242 km² and a demographic density of 70.39 inhabitants/km², approximately 90% of its territory is in the northeastern semi-arid region. Its urbanized area is 680.32 km², being one of the smallest states in the country (IBGE, 2022).

In 2022, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Paraíba reached R$ 70.292 billion, positioning the state as the sixth largest economy in the Northeast. Regarding Paraíba's GDP per capita, the recorded value was R$ 1,086, and the Human Development Index (HDI) reached 0.698, placing Paraíba in the 21st position among the country's states (IBGE, 2022). According to the data from the last Demographic Census (IBGE, 2022), Paraíba has a population of 3,974,687 inhabitants, ranking 13th nationally and 5th in the Northeast region. Regarding the characteristics of sex, age, and color/race, the census data reveal that 51.72% of the population is composed of women, totaling 2,055,832 individuals, while the male population is 1,918,855.

As for the color and race scenario, the majority of the population is black or parda (mixed-race) (63.5%). In absolute terms, the self-declaration of the population of Paraíba reveals the following distribution by color or race: 1,415,778 white people, 2,207,880 parda (mixed-race) people, 316,572 black people, 4,912 people who identified as yellow, and 30,140 people who self-declared as indigenous (IBGE, 2022). However, to discuss the provision of and access to Early Childhood Education in the

context of Paraíba, it is important to consider the aspects related to the demographic dynamics of the 0 to 6-year-old population. Therefore, below, we present the population scenario for children up to 6 years old, according to the state's mesoregions.

Figure 1 – Child Population aged 0 to 5 in Paraíba by Mesoregion (2010-2022)[5]



Source: IBGE Demographic Census (2010-2022), using Power BI.

Data from the Demographic Census from 2010 to 2022 (IBGE, 2023b) indicate that the child population of Paraíba, composed of children aged 0 to 5, has been showing a significant reduction in recent years. Data from the 2022 Demographic Census show that the state had 316,237 children in this age group, representing 7.95% of the total population; however, in 2010, there were 351,303 children (9.33% of the population), which indicates a decrease of -9.98%. This phenomenon in Paraíba reflects a broader process of demographic transition, characterized by a reduction in fertility and birth rates, and consequently by the aging of the population. It is worth noting that this trend is also observed in other Brazilian states.

According to Figure 1, childhoods in Paraíba are geographically distributed in a diverse manner and in quite varied quantities among the mesoregions. We observe

[5] The terms in the figure are translated as follows: População Infantil means "Child Population"; PB is the abbreviation for the state of Paraíba; Variação translates to "Variation" or "Change"; em P.P is the abbreviation for "em Pontos Percentuais" ("in Percentage Points"); Mil stands for "milhares" ("thousands"); and Agreste, Borborema, Mata, and Sertão are the proper names of the state's four geographic mesoregions.

that the child population of Paraíba showed significant variations between the regions in 2022 when compared to 2010. The Sertão Paraibano recorded a decrease, while the Mata Paraibana showed the sharpest drop, even though this region includes the city of João Pessoa, the state capital and the locality with the highest number of inhabitants. On the other hand, the Agreste region experienced a growth of 16.35% in the 0 to 5 age group, and the Borborema mesoregion stood out with a significant increase of 169.5% in the number of children in this same age group. It is important to note that Mata concentrates the largest number of indigenous families, while the population of Agreste predominantly self-declares as white and parda (mixed-race).

This data highlights the importance of considering socioeconomic, cultural, and demographic factors when analyzing the dynamics of the child population in each region. The disaggregation and analysis of data by mesoregions favor the identification of the particularities, needs, and challenges of the child population in each region and reveal the most significant variations among them. This detailed analysis is crucial for Early Childhood Education public policies to be more efficient and meet the specific demands of each location. For Rigotti (2012), the identification of changes in the population structure dynamics of the school-aged public that requires educational services determines the effort that public bodies must make to meet the right to access to education for these individuals.

Knowing the demographic characteristics of the child population aged 0 to 5 residing in Paraíba, as presented in the data made available by IBGE in 2022, also allows us to identify who the children of Paraíba are. In this sense, the age structure of the population is a factor requiring attention, as the age of the subjects and the population size of specific groups (0 to 3 years, 4 to 5 years, the target audience for early childhood education) need to be considered in planning the provision of spots and services in the educational system.

With this information in hand, it is possible to visualize where the children of Paraíba are and in which geographical spaces they live their childhoods. However, more important than identifying the child population structure aged 0 to 5 and the territories where they reside, it is essential that the public authorities strategically use this information to plan and direct policies and actions to serve childhoods, regardless of their territories of residence, whether in rural, water, or forest areas, or in urban centers of small or large population size. Social public policies must consider plural

childhoods, give visibility to and include all children, as they are, without distinction, subjects of rights who need to have their access to free, quality public schooling guaranteed.

4 The provision of Early Childhood Education in Paraíba: Goal 1 (PEE, PMEs) and the impacts of the pandemic

Based on this contextual information, we direct our focus to the reality of Early Childhood Education in the state of Paraíba, establishing a time frame from 2010 to 2022, the years in which the last two population censuses were conducted. Additionally, to present specific enrollment data from the School Census, we analyzed the period from 2019 to 2022, during which we experienced the pandemic. This temporal delimitation is necessary to understand the provision and reach of the right to education for young children, as well as how the state of Paraíba planned to guarantee this right, considering its Education Plans. This detailed analysis allowed us to discern the progress and challenges in expanding access, in the quality of the educational provision, and in the effective guarantee of the right to education for children aged 0 to 5 during this period.

By examining the service data, guidelines, and goals of the Education Plans for Early Childhood Education within these time frames, it was possible to analyze some impacts of the Pandemic in the State of Paraíba. Furthermore, to better understand the current scenario of EI provision, it was also important to know how this provision occurred in previous periods, as in the decade from 2000 to 2010, an incipient growth in the provision of Early Childhood Education (EI) in the state was noted.

To illustrate the evolution of services, in the year 2000, out of a total of 412,657 children in the 0 to 6 age group – a period when 6-year-old children were still served in Early Childhood Education, a situation that changed from 2006 onwards with the enactment of Law No. 11,274/2006, which established the nine-year Elementary Education – only 11,975 were enrolled in EI. In 2010, out of a contingent of 351,303 children aged 0 to 5, the number of enrollments in EI reached 122,294. Given this scenario, Goal 1 outlined in the State Education Plan of Paraíba (PEE/PB), prepared for the 2005-2014 decade, defined and approved the expansion of the provision of Early Childhood Education to “serve, within five years, 30% of the population up to 3

years of age and 80% of the population from 4 to 6 years, and by the end of the decade, to reach the goal of 50% of children aged 0 to 3 and 80% of those aged 4 to 6" (Paraíba, 2015, p. 19).

At the end of the PEE/PB (2005-2014), Paraíba achieved a service rate of only 17% for the 0 to 3 population in daycare, lower than the Northeast average and the national service rate, which, at the time, were 19.3% and 23.4%, respectively. As for preschool, Paraíba reached a service rate of 87.8%, higher than the Northeast region and the national rate, which were 86.9% and 81.2%.

In line with the guidelines established by the National Education Plan (PNE, 2014-2024) and with the pressing need to meet the specificities of the State of Paraíba, as well as to overcome the low rate of educational services for young children, Law No. 10,488 was sanctioned in June 2015, establishing the State Education Plan (PEE) for the 2015-2025 decade. The PEE/PB (2015-2025) has the primary objective of expanding access and improving the quality of Early Childhood Education in the state, with special attention to regional particularities and the mitigation of existing inequalities. To this end, the state plan set as a goal the universalization of preschool (for children aged 4 to 5) by the year 2016 and the progressive expansion of daycare services, seeking to reach 60% coverage for children aged 0 to 3 by the year 2025, for which 18 specific strategies were defined.

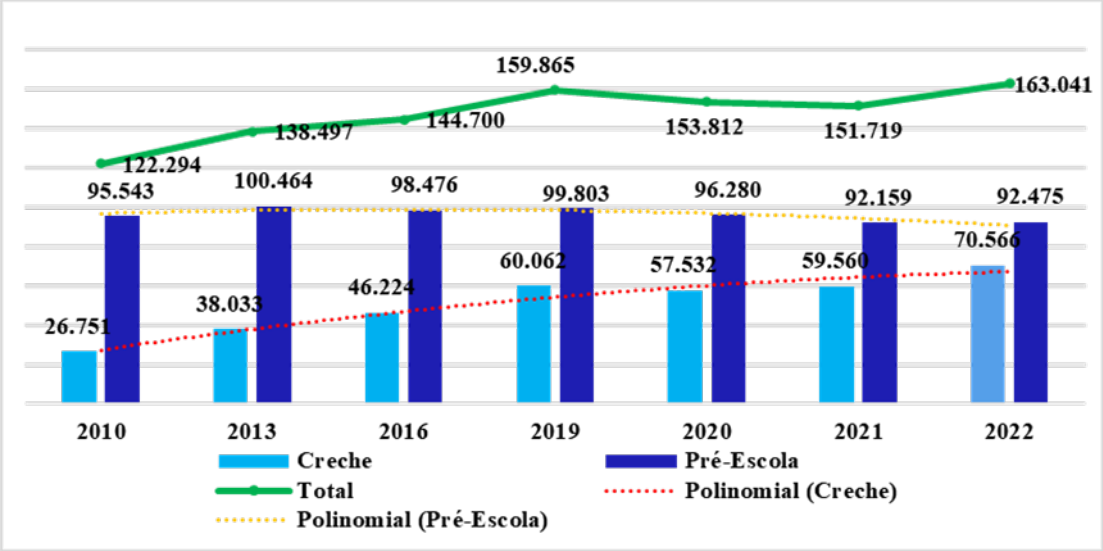
However, when we observe the EI service in Paraíba in 2022, considering the quantity of enrollment in this educational stage in the 2022 School Census and the population aged 0 to 5 from the 2022 Demographic and School Censuses, we find a service rate of 33.86% in daycare (0 to 3 years) and 85.83% in preschool (4 to 5 years). Thus, of the 316,237 children aged 0 to 5 residing in Paraíba in 2022, 208,255 were up to 3 years old and only 70,410 of them were enrolled in daycare; and of the 107,982 who were 4 to 5 years old, 96,100 were enrolled in preschool.

This means that the State of Paraíba did not reach the preschool universalization goal set for 2016 and likely will not reach it, considering the year 2025. An additional 14.37%, or about 15,500 new enrollments, would be needed to universalize preschool, an average annual expansion of 4.4 percentage points until 2025. It is good to remember that the percentage of preschool attendance has decreased in relation to 2010, when the service rate was 87% (PEE/PB, 2005/2014). In the case of daycare services, the challenge is even greater, as 26% is needed to

reach the 60% goal by the end of the PEE/PB's term, which corresponds to the need for approximately 33,561 new spots between the years 2023 and 2025.

Given this, it is worth questioning whether the pandemic influenced the non-fulfillment of Goal 1 of the PEE/PB (2014/2025), in its daycare and preschool indicators. Graph 1, below, shows the evolution of enrollment in Early Childhood Education in Paraíba in the 2010 to 2022 time frame, but also allows us to observe the trajectory of enrollments in the context of the pandemic.

Graph 1 – Enrollments in Early Childhood Education (2010-2022)[6]



Source: Statistical Synopsis of the School Census 2010-2022 (INEP, 2022).

Initially, we can see that the total number of enrollments registered in 2010 was significantly low. We also observe that in 2019, 159,865 enrollments were registered, which represents a considerable increase. Secondly, upon analyzing the period between 2019 and 2021, we verify a reduction of -5.10% in the total number of enrollments in these three years. Specifically in 2020, there was a drop of -3.79% compared to 2019, and the growth recorded in the subsequent years was not sufficient to overcome this negative average compared to the previous year.

An explanatory factor for the consecutive drop in Early Childhood Education enrollment percentages during the verified period was the time when the country was going through the process of school closures due to social distancing measures

[6] The terms in the graph are translated as follows: “Creche”: Daycare; “Pré-Escola”: Preschool; “Polinomial”: Polynomial.

because of the Covid-19 pandemic. We know that, due to this fact, there were directives from the World Health Organization and the Federal Government, as well as a mobilization by state and municipal administrators, for the definition and compliance with sanitary measures for social distancing. This process resulted in school closures, and in many cases, in enrollment deferment or withdrawal/dropout. The school networks were forced to make efforts to offer remote learning, however, this was a challenging reality for administrators, education professionals, families, and especially for the children who were faced with the impossibility of doing/living school without present bodies (Coutinho; Côco, 2020).

This situation created significant challenges for families, who often did not have adequate alternatives for the education, care, and protection of their young children. Uncertainty and fear also contributed to many parents choosing not to enroll or to withdraw their children from school during this period. With this, the challenges were greater for more socially and economically vulnerable families. The pandemic, therefore, was reflected in the reduction of enrollments, in the guarantee of the right to education, and accentuated the already existing disparities in access to Early Childhood Education.

In Table 1, below, we can observe the scenario of Early Childhood Education provision specifically during the pandemic period, considering enrollment by administration type and by location (INEP, 2022; IBGE, 2023b).

Table 1 – Evolution of the number of enrollments in Early Childhood Education, by administration type, location, and period – Paraíba (2019 to 2022)

Year	Education stage - Daycare - 0 to 3 years							
	Enrollment Total	Administration Type			Location		Period	
		Municipal	Private	Federal	Rural	Urban	Integral	Partial
2019	60.062	45.154	14.753	155	7.780	52.282	30.249	29.813
2020	57.532	45.533	11.850	149	7.764	49.768	30.362	27.170
2021	59.560	50.561	8.837	162	9.257	50.303	33.899	25.661
2022	70.566	55.213	15.193	160	10.543	60.023	37.010	33.556
Variation (%) 2019-2022	17,49%	22,28%	2,98%	3,23%	35,51%	14,81%	22,35%	12,55%
	Education stage - Daycare – 4 A 5 anos							

Year	Enrollment Total	Administration Type			Location		Period	
		Municipal	Private	Federal	Rural	Urban	Private	Federal
2019	99.803	67.055	32.431	317	21.041	78.762	9.592	90.803
2020	96.280	68.565	27.409	306	20.597	75.683	10.172	86.108
2021	92.159	70.239	21.636	284	20.424	71.735	11.651	80.508
2022	96.475	68.055	28.160	260	19.850	76.625	11.699	84.776
Variation (%) 2019-2022	-3,33%	1,49%	-13,17%	-17,8%	-5,66%	-2,70%	21,97%	-6,64%

Source: Statistical Synopsis of the School Census (2019 to 2022) (INEP, 2022).

To allow for a more detailed assessment of the number of enrollments in the period under consideration, we adopted the interval from 2019 (pre-pandemic period) to 2022 (post-pandemic period), using data from INEP's educational indicators for 2019-2022. The data at hand present the evolution of access to preschool and daycare and allow us to perceive the discrepancy in the provision of spots between these two sub-stages.

The analysis of this data reveals that the service rates for the preschool sub-stage reached levels very close to universalization in the State of Paraíba. However, the pandemic period had a significant impact on the provision, resulting in a reduction of -3.33% in total enrollments. It should be noted that the spots were predominantly (67%) offered in the public school network, on a part-time basis, and in urban areas. Despite the prevalence of part-time services, a retraction of -6.64% was observed in this modality between 2019 and 2022. In contrast, full-time services showed a remarkable growth of 21.97% in the context of the pandemic. Furthermore, it is important to point out that the provision by the private sector was the most impacted, with a significant drop of -13.17%.

Regarding the provision in rural territories, we perceive that there was a reduction of -5.66% in the number of enrollments between 2019 and 2022. This drop was one of the factors that influenced the failure to reach the goal of universal preschool, making it necessary to include 10.66% of the 4 to 5-year-old population in EI.

With respect to the service or provision of spots in daycare, the data also indicate that the number of enrollments for the 0 to 3 age group showed a total growth

of 17.49% in the period from 2019 to 2022. The service between 2020 and 2021 had a representative reduction, in both public and private provision. However, this drop did not impact the growth of daycare services, which was already occurring in the state, as well as in Brazil.

To illustrate, enrollments in early childhood education registered a significant increase, jumping from 59,560 in 2021 to 70,566 in 2022. This growth covered both public and private provision; however, the main driver of this increase was the expansion of enrollments in the private sector, which rose from 8,837 to 15,192 between 2021 and 2022. Despite this increase, it is crucial to note that the number of enrollments has not reached the level necessary to meet Goal 1 of the State Education Plan of Paraíba (2015-2025), which called for the inclusion of 60% of children aged 0 to 5 enrolled in daycare centers.

However, considering that in 2022 there were 208,255 children in the 0 to 3 age group and that only 70,566 (33.88%) were enrolled, it would still be necessary to enroll 26.12% of the 0 to 3-year-old population to reach the 60% goal of children enrolled in EI. This fact constitutes a problem; for, even though there was an increase in enrollment rates, this rise in numbers has not been sufficient even to reach the national goal of 50% and is even further from the 60% foreseen in the PEE-PB. This means that more than half of the children in Paraíba up to 3 years old remain excluded from the right to access EI, especially those residing in rural areas. Furthermore, it is important to remember that this service percentage involves public and private enrollments, meaning it is possible and necessary to increase public provision through the action of the Union and the States with redistributive actions, and technical and financial assistance to the municipalities, to ensure the right to education for babies (0 to 3 years) and children (4 to 5 years).

In this sense, “[...] defining 50% service can directly confront the right that 100% of children aged 0 to 3 have to attend daycare, while it may overestimate the demand, depending on the context” (Coutinho; Côco, 2020, p. 6). In line with the author's perspective, we share the view that, given the inequitable provision identified at the national level and, specifically, in the State of Paraíba, the definition of a goal with national scope is of undeniable necessity.

The State Education Plan of Paraíba (2014-2025) advocated for a percentage of daycare service (60%) that exceeds the nationally established goal (50%). The said

plan presents a detailed characterization and diagnosis of education in the state, segmented by educational stage (Paraíba, 2015). In its 18 strategies, it is possible to identify comprehensive actions on various work fronts, defined in a collaborative regime with the Union and the municipalities, such as surveying the demand for daycare centers, promoting continuing education programs for its professionals, and monitoring the access and permanence of children in Early Childhood Education (EI).

Furthermore, the plan includes strategies aimed at addressing crucial issues, such as the adaptations of the infrastructure of early childhood education institutions in accordance with established basic parameters. Also included are support for specialized complementary educational services, encouragement of access to and permanence in full-time Early Childhood Education for all children in the age group, as well as the promotion of services for rural populations and indigenous, gypsy, and quilombola communities in the very localities where they live.

When analyzing Goal 1 in the state plan, it becomes essential to also observe the municipal plans, since the municipalities are the federative entities legally responsible for the provision, supply, and implementation of Early Childhood Education (EI). In this sense, a survey of all Municipal Education Plans (PMEs) of Paraíba was carried out, followed by an analysis of the introduction and diagnosis of each one. Goal 1 and its respective strategies were then systematized in a chart, aiming for a more comprehensive understanding of how the state, through the PMEs, directed its attention to Goal 1. It was observed that, of the 223 municipalities in Paraíba, all declared to have prepared their respective plans. However, on the MEC's PNE em Movimento page, it was found that four plans were not available and others were illegible. Additionally, a variety was verified in the definition of Indicator B of Goal 1, referring to the expansion of daycare centers, among the different PMEs.

We observed that the municipalities set percentages that vary between 20%, 25%, 35%, 40%, and even 100%. Of the 223 municipalities, 178 maintained the 50% rate, similar to that established in the PNE (2014/2025), 16 defined it below the national goal, and 13 followed the same percentage approved in the State Education Plan. It is worth noting that one municipality set 100% service as its goal. Regarding preschools, all municipalities followed the universalization goal, with some differences in deadlines: 213 PMEs maintained the year 2016 as the base year for achieving universalization,

as per the PNE, while others set 2018 or the end of the Plan's validity, taking into account their realities and planning. It is worth pointing out that at least 5 PMEs altered the percentage or the wording.

Of the 223 municipalities, including the capital, 128 conducted the first monitoring and 24 carried out the first evaluation of their Plan; but there were 2 incomplete PMEs and, in some cases, illegible plans. Almost all of the municipalities, precisely 188, carried out the diagnosis and characterization of both the municipality and the local education reality. In contrast, 27 PMEs were not found, 2 were illegible, and 4 plans were not located. Additionally, a considerable number of files in photograph or scanned format was observed. Regarding the strategies, a great variation in quantity was found among the municipalities, in addition to the frequent occurrence of copies or repetitions among them, among other aspects.

This information highlights the inherent complexity of implementing a national policy at the municipal level, which, in turn, can be distinct and unequal with regard to population, territory, and budgetary, financial, and technical capacities (Santos, 2024). All these factors directly influence the implementation and achievement of the established goal.

The aspects and information presented contribute to the reflection on the complexity of the plans and their goals, although they are not the subject of in-depth study at this moment, as they are part of a broader research scope. The objective of this section is to assist in the contextualization and understanding of Goal 1 in the state of Paraíba. However, for the purposes of this work, the service indicators constitute the main focus of our observation, considering that we are analyzing the possible impacts of the pandemic period, more precisely between the years 2019 and 2022, on the achievement of the said goal.

When we look at the Fifth Cycle Monitoring Report of the PNE at the MEC [7], we observe that four states showed a decline in the indicator in relation to the year 2013 and the Baseline document. They are: Amapá (-8.2%), Paraíba (-2.0%), Sergipe (-1.4), and Piauí (-1.1%). In the case of Paraíba, the service for children aged 4 and 5 in

[7] Consult the documents developed by INEP/MEC to track and monitor the PNE (2014-2024). The first of them was published in 2015 and is called Baseline: National Education Plan 2014-2024. Subsequently, five reports were published; the last of them in 2024. Available at: https://www.gov.br/inep/pt-br/areas-de-atuacao/gestao-do-conhecimento-e-estudos-educacionais/estudos-educacionais/relatorios-de-monitoramento-do-pne. Accessed on: Sep. 3, 2024.

preschools went from 95.1% to 93.1% (Brazil, 2024), which means that Goal 1 and its indicators would not be met.

Regarding the particularities of the municipalities, a more accurate study would be necessary to determine the achievement of Goal 1, due to the goals established by each municipality. However, it is worth noting that, according to the 2nd Technical Report on the Survey and Monitoring of Education Plans of Paraíba, conducted by the Court of Accounts with data from 2019, only 60 municipalities were above 97% service for achieving Indicator 1A. Thus, practically meeting the goal of universalizing preschool, 163 failed to comply and had coverage between 75% and 97%, and 29 had less than 75%, which was considered a critical state (Paraíba, 2021).

In the case of Indicator 1B, the average percentage of service for children aged 0 to 3 was 34.3% in 2019, an increase of 3.3% compared to 2018; the situation was worse than that of Indicator 1A. Of the 223 municipalities, only 26 had a regular status, with service greater than 48.5%; 27 were between 37.5% and 48.5%, at risk of non-compliance; another 86 were between 25% and 37.5%, at risk of critical non-compliance; and 80 had less than 25%. Four municipalities had insufficient data. It is important to mention that this situation refers to a moment before the pandemic. Although we do not yet have a more detailed and updated report, the data from the Fifth Monitoring Cycle, available at INEP (Brazil, 2024), as already presented here, show non-achievements and setbacks.

It should be noted that Paraíba[8] adopted the project "*Education Cannot Wait*" for the pandemic period, with specific guidelines for Early Childhood Education, such

[8] According to Silva and Albino (2020), the government of Paraíba, as an immediate reaction to the pandemic regarding the educational sector, decreed a "school recess" in the state public network, anticipating the school holidays. Subsequently, Ordinance No. 418, of April 2020, formalized, through the State Secretariat of Education and of Science and Technology (SEECT), non-presential teaching via the implementation of the "Special Regime." To contribute to this process, the SEECT created the Paraíba Educação portal, with the objective of providing teacher training and guidance on activities in this context. Also, the State Education Council of Paraíba (CEE-PB) acted with a normative function, first by approving Resolution CEE/PB No. 120 in April to guide the institutions. Subsequently, in May, this Resolution was amended by Resolution CEE/PB No. 140 of May 2020, aligning with Opinion No. 5/2020 of the National Education Council (CNE), providing for the reorganization of calendars and curricula, and specifying which non-presential activities would be counted towards the fulfillment of the minimum annual workload of 800 hours. Particularly for EI (Early Childhood Education), the guidelines evolved. First, Resolution No. 120/2020 vetoed the remote learning regime for this stage. Later, with Resolution No. 140/2020, it began to recommend that institutions, within their autonomy, should develop and propose activities to families or guardians, considering the specificities of EI (Silva; Albino, 2020).

as limiting screen time – aligned with the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) – and the distribution of pedagogical kits (pencils, modeling clay, etc.) for playful and sensory activities at home (Instituto Rui Barbosa, 2021). Despite these measures, the data indicate a drop in enrollments, and this occurred because the use of the kits required constant mediation by adults, which was not always possible because, in poorer families where adults still had jobs, time availability was scarce. As Koslinski and Bartholo (2021, p. 19) observed, the socioeconomic level of the families influenced participation in the activities.

The data presented demonstrate that the State of Paraíba, in the analyzed period, did not meet Goal 1 of either the PNE or the PEE; consequently, many of the municipalities also did not reach Goal 1 of their Municipal Education Plans. Thus, it became essential to develop and implement public policies and actions aimed at recovering enrollment rates, as well as promoting the universalization of preschool and expanding educational provision for children aged 0 to 3. The implementation of these measures was of fundamental importance for the state to be able to achieve Goal 1 established in the education plans.

At the same time, we can also affirm that the movement for expanding access to EI, especially regarding the daycare sub-stage, is a reflection of the intensification of research and public policies aimed at this age group, and of social pressure, mainly from social movements, which has been occurring since the 1988 Constitution and the 1996 LDB. It is evident that this situation has been impacted by the effects of the increase in the number of new daycare centers acquired by municipalities in Paraíba through agreements with the Federal Program Proinfância, a program of national scope that aims to guarantee children's access to daycare centers and preschools, as well as to provide for the improvement of the physical infrastructure of the EI network in Brazil.

Besides building and equipping daycare centers, Proinfância aimed to promote supplementary and redistributive actions to ensure access to EI institutions, the progressive correction of access disparities, and the guarantee of a minimum quality standard. The study by Freitas (2024) on Proinfância in the State of Paraíba found that, although the program covered the four mesoregions of the state – Agreste Paraibano, Borborema, Mata Paraibana, and Sertão Paraibano – and, by 2022, 163 municipalities had joined the program, totaling 292 agreements, only 57.87% of this total number of

signed agreements were completed and delivered to society. These agreements contributed to the construction of new schools and the increase of new spots in Early Childhood Education (EI), in both daycare centers and preschools (Freitas, 2024). However, these new establishments and spots were not sufficient for the state to reach the goals established in both the National Plan and the State Education Plan.

The analyzed data reveal that many children in Paraíba have had their right to access Early Childhood Education (EI) denied, due to the lack of specific service institutions for their age groups in their own communities. This problem mainly affects the poorest children, those residing in peripheral areas, in rural territories, in settlements, quilombos, and indigenous communities. In other words, the most vulnerable children are exactly those who face the least access to education (Freitas, 2024). This data shows that the problem of unequal access to EI is not something new, arising from or generated by the pandemic, but rather deepened by it.

The pandemic period showed us that it is these groups (poor, residents of peripheral areas, rural territories, settlements, quilombos, and indigenous communities) who are the most vulnerable and who suffer the most from the effects of not having access to adequate social policies. Indeed, we are not able to fully measure the impacts of the pandemic in the area of education, but we know that the need for access to education for all children is a reality that needs to be discussed with more attention and must become an urgent agenda at the governmental level. The sooner a baby or a child has the opportunity to access quality Early Childhood Education, the more we will be offering them the chance to be educated and cared for in an environment that nurtures the development of their learning, their play, their well-being, and their best cognitive, social, and emotional conditions.

We understand that access to EI is an important factor for social transformation and for the reduction of inequalities. Therefore, the damages of the pandemic for children aged 0 to 5 are immeasurable. Even though many EI institutions offered remote activities, the removal from their social and friendship circle, exposure to stressful situations, fear, and anguish that often did not find spaces for symbolization and processing, and the lack of fulfillment of their basic needs, such as housing, food, and health, among many other aspects, were felt by many children.

5 Final Considerations

Therefore, this study shows that the pandemic significantly impacted the reduction in the number of enrollments of children aged 0 to 5 in Early Childhood Education. This scenario was due to social isolation, which led many institutions to suspend their in-person activities for an extended period, decreasing demand and increasing dropout rates. Among the factors that contributed to this situation, we can highlight the lack of technological resources as one of the challenges to the continuity of educational activities for EI children. After all, as noted, many families did not have the necessary conditions to acquire such resources. Added to this is the fact that the educational specificities of this age group themselves, which intrinsically link caring and educating, conflicted with the teaching model that was being offered at that time (remote). Another relevant factor was the family structure of many children, which hindered the active participation of family members in the pedagogical activities proposed by the institutions.

As we have seen, the pandemic strongly impacted the provision of Early Childhood Education, both in the country and in the State of Paraíba. Paraíba did not advance in the indicators for educational services for children aged 0 to 5, with a setback in both the universalization of preschool and the expansion of daycare. Consequently, it did not achieve Goal 1 in the Municipal Plans, nor in the State Education Plan, consequently reflecting in the non-achievement of Goal 1 of the National Education Plan PNE (2014-2024). We also observed that non-white children, those residing in rural areas, the poorest, and those living in territories of greater vulnerability were the ones who suffered the most from the consequences of the pandemic and the closure of Early Childhood Education schools. This scenario manifested throughout Brazil, including in the state of Paraíba. We also found that even with the addition of new EI institutions built by Proinfância, the Early Childhood Education indicators and the achievement of Goal 1 remained distant from the established objectives, due to the impact of the pandemic on the educational services for children aged 0 to 5.

Although we recognize the impact of the pandemic on the fulfillment of the goals of the National Education Plan (PNE), it is fundamental to emphasize that it does not represent the sole cause for the non-achievement of Goal 1. The insufficiency of

investments, especially in a context marked by Constitutional Amendment No. 95, added to the choice and role of the Brazilian State from 2016 onwards, with budget cuts aimed at social rights, also contributed significantly to this scenario. In this sense, the non-fulfillment of Goal 1 of the PNE serves as a pressing warning for the need for urgent and effective actions, aimed at guaranteeing the fundamental right to education for all Brazilian children.

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