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Developing Competencies in the Field of Early Childhood Education: Stories of Teacher Trainees in Times of Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Teachers in training require curricular elements and pedagogical skills that motivate their teaching qualifications to contribute to their good professional performance. These arguments encourage the present study, which aims to show the different views that teachers in training have on the competencies that a teacher in training should have in the field of early childhood education. The epistemological framework of the research is oriented from the qualitative-interpretative approach, using the focus group as a collection technique. The results show that the conception of the teacher must evolve, having as a fundamental basis the current reality of the society he/she expects to educate, which leads to the need to establish spaces for training and qualification in methodological aspects that allow implementing learning experiences focused on the development of skills and competencies that have an impact on the use of the digital society in a responsible and ratified way in school autonomy and strategies designed to strengthen the learning pace of schoolchildren.

Keywords: Competencies; early childhood education; play; didactics; didactics; research.

INTRODUCTION

The skills that are enhanced in early childhood have been determinant for the social, emotional, cultural and educational structure of human beings (Prato *et al.*, 2018). At that stage, the peripeteia is expanded so that the development of the person manages to emphasize his possible decision, the change and impulse of the filaments that he weaves to forge his quality of life.

Childhood is, in a pragmatic sense, the theater where the identity of humanity is forged, being the skills that children develop, the practical epicenter where the processes that will determine their daily and future tasks are consolidated (Rivera *et al.*, 2019). Even so, this scenario is not only composed of each

of the capabilities and skills that children develop but also involves several processes that are built in the very center of education, which affect the techniques that enhance these skills (Pineda *et al.*, 2019; Barrientos *et al.*, 2020; Rodríguez & Cruz, 2020; Romero *et al.*, 2021).

These have an identity that allows them to be visible: teaching; which is professionally forged from the holistic understanding of the cognitive and biological nature of infants, accompanied by a wide range of pedagogical possibilities that make their work, a formative process “that considers the triad mind, body and spirit [...], therefore, points to the importance of prioritizing multiple conceptual, procedural and attitudinal knowledge” (Castillo-Cedeño *et al.*, 2017, p. 5).

The observance that constantly takes place in early childhood classrooms has a significant impact on how teachers interact between knowledge, children, their context and their professional role (García-Quintero & Villamizar-Suárez, 2017). According to Martínez (2012) School is a rare, singular, unprecedented, unique, unrepeatably practice, in the sense that it prepares for tomorrow, the craftsman teaches his work there, the school “postpones the encounter with practical knowledge, postpones it, instead, it administers a moral and physical normalization” (Barragán *et al.*, 2012, p. 66). In short, the teacher has an impact on the educational reality in terms of the general recognition of his context, of the particularity of each infant and emphasizes where education and the skills that are gradually developed after each process of pedagogical accompaniment are linked. Even so, it is not only about equating the content, methods, techniques, processes, devices or the classroom against the dynamism that can be presented there, but it implies the incidence of the skills and competencies acquired by the teacher in his professional training in key to guaranteeing the Right to education, from his qualification (Hernández-Dávila & Díaz-Abdala, 2017).

In this sense, Bolívar (2019), Chacón-Guerrero *et al.* (2017) and Gamboa (2016) affirm that the quality of education is directly related to the quality of teacher training, hence the belief that the more and better such training is, the better the quality of education will be. However, the competencies that teachers forge in their training process make up one of the great academic debates in pedagogy, since there is no unified agreement that affects the programmatic delimitation of these competencies. In this regard

It requires a training process mediated by a deep capacity for reflection on their teaching practices and andragogical experiences in the university classroom, for the pedagogical solution to situations that emerge in the daily life of an educational environment in which professional groups in training will face a student body whose ages start from birth to 4 years old (Castillo-Cedeño *et al.*, 2017, p. 6).

In addition, the challenges posed by the digital in the daily life of humanity, delve into new formative parameters of teachers, in the key to new citizenships that will be formed along with the intervention of technology (Ortega *et al.*, 2019; Hernández *et al.*, 2019; Hernández *et al.*, 2018). Without the need to delay the location of the analysis, study and understanding of the competencies required in the teaching practice, it is important to determine that the debate flows between playfulness, research, didactics and theoretical foundations.

This discussion may have some looks that provide constitutive elements within the framework of teacher training that delimit the possible competencies required by the professional profile (Gamboa & Urbina, 2020). There, for Peñaranda *et al.* (2019), “the playfulness in the teaching of different areas provide important lights on issues of teacher training, from the use of manuals for traditional games as a learning strategy in the area of mathematics in elementary school” (p. 83), taking as a methodological turning point, the disciplinary approach and the game that affects the strengthening of the knowledge of infants and the strengthening of innovative strategies for teachers in training or professional exercise.

On the other hand, research sponsors multiple variables that allow teachers to approach the school reality in detail, from the implementation of strategies and methods that make the classroom exercise a pedagogical laboratory that scientifically analyzes education and its evolution (Hernández *et al.*, 2019). Teacher training in this sense has an impact on the way they perform their professional activity since it generates a pragmatic binomial that integrates the formative elements they use and the collection of data that allows tracing improvement routes to motivate the practice itself towards quality (Gamboa *et al.*, 2020).

Research becomes the tool developed by the teacher that influences the search for alternatives and school innovation. Thus, its strengthening is not seen as a tool but as an indispensable skill for the teaching-learning process that has an impact on how classroom knowledge is measured, ergo and following Buendía-Arias *et al.* (2018), it is stated that

It is through research that teachers in training can approach the experience of teaching practice as an opportunity to deepen their self-knowledge and to systematically seek solutions to the problems that arise in the educational environment in which they are immersed. This purpose necessarily entails the development of research competencies (p. 183).

Or in other words,

Only the development of research competencies as a cross-cutting component of any profession can provide greater guarantees for professional staff to be able to respond to the dynamics of constant change and rapid advances that characterize today's society (García-Gutiérrez & Aznar-Díaz, 2019, p. 3).

Thus, the academic training activity of teachers makes research an imperative competence, given that professionals are required to prepare for the development of programs that go beyond the welfarist visions and have clarity of intentionality, meaning and transcendence of early childhood care and education (Castillo-Cedeño *et al.*, 2017, p. 20), making clear that this competence becomes a door to multiple possibilities for school development, innovation and qualification.

Now, the teacher's professional performance may not only be marked by the integration of pedagogical processes in which play enhances the learning of infants or the epistemological processes that have an impact on the general structure of the research field (Vanegas *et al.*, 2022), but it also delves into how the theoretical foundations and the didactic processes that arise from them are understood. There is no doubt that the theoretical foundation is a determining starting point for the pedagogical practice itself since it condenses the views that have been woven in the history of education to respond to its meaning and purpose (Eslava *et al.*, 2018). Each one has managed to gestate paths that have been opened where the cognitive, subjective, emotional (Vanegas & Gamboa, 2022), and cultural development of schoolchildren have become the epicenter of projection and vocational qualification of the teacher. These views are historically charged with controversy, but when analyzed by those who are professionalized in education, they provide models, foundations, parameters and specificity in which the teaching role is dynamic. In this regard,

Teachers need to be competent in the design and development of didactic processes -knowing and knowing how to do- and, on the other hand, and no less important, in establishing productive organizational and management relationships -knowing how to be and knowing how to be in the school (Dios *et al.*, 2018, p. 285).

It is thus foreshadowed that the conjunction between theory and didactics affects not only the school reality but also the very actions of teachers who modulate their competencies from the foundation, the design of strategies that are key to the formative quality of infants and the curricular sense of the instruments used to verify the professional qualification of teachers who take their professional context as a holistic field in which their actions meet the needs of today's society. In this sense, teachers will have stipulated a "Teaching process that takes into account the freedoms of individuals, that is framed in the reality of the context and in which students and teachers are built, focused on common objectives of collective and dynamic transformation" (Castillo-Fernández *et al.*, 2018. p. 107).

In sum, the formative and professional process of teachers starts from the qualification of each competence that they manage to enhance throughout their schooling and work activity. Imminently, the skills that are qualified to execute the procedures that lead to the quality of teaching and learning have a complex composition of multiple variables that need to be analyzed from the perspective of each professional in education.

Added to this are the particularities that early education needs to lay the exact foundations that affect how infants assume the contents that are delivered to them within the school reality. Because of this, the specific competencies that teachers acquire in their training process are a dynamic process that is consolidated with their educational performance. Thus, Castillo-Cedeño *et al.* (2017) mention that

It requires a training process mediated by a deep capacity for reflection on their teaching practices and andragogical experiences in the university classroom, for the pedagogical solution to situations that emerge in the daily life of an educational environment in which professional groups in training will face a student body whose ages start from birth to 4 years old (p. 6).

Therefore, it is essential to understand how early childhood teachers understand each of the competencies they developed in their training process, taking as a starting point the focal analysis of a group of teachers who will participate in quantitative characterization of each of the skills described above. The aim is to know which of them have a direct impact on their professional work, on the school reality of their classrooms and the pedagogical projection of their formative spaces with infants. It also seeks to understand which of them are constantly strengthened in their teaching role. Likewise, we will inquire about the formative relevance of these competencies in children's degree programs in the face of the challenges of today's society. Finally, a view will be presented that manages to project the meaning and purpose of the teacher training processes in the undergraduate programs, based on the importance of promoting and developing the competencies that make the teacher a fundamental actor in the school qualification.

METHOD

The purpose of qualitative research is to take data from a participant perspective, that is to say: it values what the participants of the sample have been exposed to during the data collection. This seeks to delve into more specific information, taking into account each member who participated in the process and what they were able to describe. Therefore, the population that was taken into account in this work were 19 students of the fourth-semester undergraduate program in early childhood education, who contributed to the consolidation of the findings and conclusions that will be presented below.

This focus group allowed, according to Angrosino (2012), "the collection of information on the material products, social relations, beliefs and values of a community" (p. 17), given that they are those students who are involved daily in the professional teacher training as a result of their participation in the practice process, which affects the identification of the competencies that the teacher in training must acquire from their direct contact with the context. It is necessary, at the same time, to take into account that this

type of sampling has a preponderance due to its heterogeneity, allowing each participant to export the data from his/her subjectivity, given that, and taking into account what Bautista (2011) stated, it is flexible and allows for revision and adjustment during the development of the research.

In sum, the focus group allowed examining the competencies that the early childhood education graduate must acquire within his or her formative process, emphasizing the methodological, didactic and pedagogical aspects with which they faced a population that gradually returned to the classroom, after two years of social distancing due to the health measures brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Likewise, each of the participants externalized the views they hold on the role assumed in teaching after the imperative linkage of digital devices within the school reality, which led to the appropriation of new teaching strategies. For its part, the group was allowed to delimit each of the categories of analysis that are taken into account in this research work, knowing that the return to face-to-face teaching is still an unfinished and progressive issue.

For the analysis of the information collected in the focus group, each of the arguments presented by the teachers in training regarding each of the questions presented was taken into account, thus becoming 196 units of analysis coded from emerging categories employing the Atlas.ti software. "This technique is used to make theory and relationships emerge from the data" (Gamboa *et al.*, 2018, p. 5).

The following table presents in detail each of the categories analyzed within the sample extracted from the focus group.

Table 1. Categories of analysis.

Categories	Subcategories
FTI: Theoretical basis and research	PA: Learning Processes.
	EM: Methodological Elements.
DL: Didactic and playful.	DD: Digital Devices
	CCC: Cognitive and corporal characteristics.
	RP: Return to presential.

To define the two groups of categories, the direct relationship with the data from the focus group was taken into account, which established units of analysis that have an impact on the findings. Therefore, each grouping contains two competencies that were delimited as a result of their relevance in the training of future teachers in early childhood education. To these were attached some subcategories that were delimited by the information provided by the 19 participants of the focus group. In addition, the traceability that was possible from each competency and its inference in the field, within the formative process of students, was taken into account. In this sense, and as can be seen in Table XXXX, for the theoretical foundation and the research, it was taken into account that each subcategory responded to them within the pragmatic plane of the classrooms, namely, the systematic recognition of the learning processes of the infants and each of the elements used in the classroom exercise by the teachers. On the other hand, the confluence between didactics and playfulness took into account the procedures and elements managed for the process of knowledge mediation, without leaving aside all that was required for the gradual return to face-to-face learning.

RESULTS

The results presented below are schematized from an inductive process concerning the information provided by the focus group and the coding carried out by Atlas IT. To reach these findings, it was necessary to establish two categories and in each of them, their respective subcategories. All this was

carried out because of the need to organize the raw data that were obtained during the sample and that is supported below. From this, it is important to clarify that they are two categories of punctual analysis, namely, *Theoretical foundation* and *research and Didactics* and *playfulness*.

Theoretical and research basis.

Regarding the characteristics and changes evidenced in the learning processes and the competencies related to the theoretical foundation and research competencies, there is evidence that “I do not have enough support from teachers and classmates to carry out my activities and what I do not understand will remain that way because I do not inquire, nor do I make theoretical reflections regarding the topics covered (1:7)”. These accounts show, in a certain sense, the aftermath of the pandemic on educational issues and particularly in the context of collaborative learning. In this context, Gamboa *et al.* (2022) and Guaniapa and Franco (2022) state that collaborative learning should be represented in various forms such as the transmission and reception of information virtually shared by digital media; the exchange of perceptions, notions and experiences, in addition to academic material; organization of group needs; and, joint tasks and work. Similarly, the participants point out that “isolation, I think it made us lose that sense of companionship (1:39)”, which shows that the students feel a disconnection with their peers and teachers and generated difficulties in establishing solid cooperative work relationships.

On the other hand, it was possible to identify some advantages presented in the development of competencies amid social distancing; and it is the formation of autonomy and responsibility, concerning this, a student affirms that “an advantage could be the responsibility that each one acquires and took before the study as such, doing according to what was planned and learning in autonomy” (1:15).

On the other hand, it is evident that the methodological elements that arise from the consolidation of the learning processes as a response to the new teaching and learning dynamics that are determinant in the development of the competencies of teachers and child teachers are evidenced not by the competencies of the teachers in training, but of the trainers, this is shown by an account of a student when stating that “there were teachers who sometimes did not even know how to connect or how to send me a link or how to upload a workshop (1: 40)” an aspect that highlights the gaps that still exist today in educational innovation processes, since many teachers devoted themselves to the development of “learning guides” while waiting for the return to virtuality, a return that lasted for more than two years, leaving significant gaps in the development of student competencies. However, it is also possible to demonstrate the strengthening of technological tools as didactic teaching elements, since teachers found the need to qualify their competencies, as argued by the students when stating that: “we learned how to also use in a technological way those pages to make concept maps, diagrams to perform experiments and you can also get results by conducting surveys and activity questions (1:83)”.

The above accounts are also in agreement with other discourses such as

Virtual libraries broadened knowledge since readers not only had access to the books in the library but also to those in many libraries around the world, as well as videoconferences that connected us with other contexts since, in times of classroom attendance, students would not be able to have global scenarios in the classroom as they had in those times. (2:13)

Undoubtedly, the training spaces and the development of competencies in crisis contexts left important elements for reflection, such as the progress in the appropriation of digital technologies by both teachers and students to develop adequate didactic scenarios for learning in different fields of knowledge (Castro *et al.*, 2020).

Didactic and recreational.

As a second category of analysis, didactics and playfulness is established as the central axis in the competencies of children's teachers. In this sense, when coding the information collected, three important elements emerged: the use of digital devices, the changes and impacts on cognitive and bodily characteristics, and the challenges represented by the return to face-to-face teaching (Prada *et al.*, 2022). Concerning digital devices, a consensus was found that aspects such as “not having internet connection (1:10)” “not having technological resources such as computers or tablets (1:11)” and “not having electricity (1:12)” are determining variables in the success of the learning process. Similarly, in arguments such as “we became dependent on technological tools (2:7)” the feelings of dependence and need not only for devices but also for networks to be part of the interconnected society that is now consolidated can be evidenced (De la Cruz *et al.*, 2019).

Regarding the changes in the cognitive and bodily characteristics of students during social isolation, we found arguments such as: “isolation affected the mental health of many people to be locked up (1:24)” “also in health before because it causes tiredness headache and the way to always be sitting or that did not get tired. (1:31)” “virtuality in certain part became very frustrating because sometimes if the internet failed or the document did not load it was something that frustrated one as a student (1:38)” “some people lost their childhood, they could not develop the ability to interact and relate with others, that being in the classroom demands the situation to interact, to relate, I feel that this was one of the changes in the respect for the school environment (1: 54)” “many young people are also being affected by this mental part since they enter into depression or despair because sometimes they have no time left or they do not learn and retain information in their brain (2:19)”.

The above arguments reveal that isolation had an impact on cognitive and physical development, also the return to face-to-face dynamics impacts development, since the time in isolation generated behaviors and rhythms of life that were altered again in the progressive return to “normality”, which is evidenced in turn in the voices of the actors on the return to face-to-face, who expressed feeling “uncertainty about not knowing how to cope with the presence in the way of interacting with others when expressing our ideas was easier through a screen (2: 16)” “the loss of confidence that is notorious, since being in front of a screen made us feel more confident (2:17)” “we are experiencing stress because it is really now face-to-face where we are assuming responsibility in the academic and also in the economic part, because before we were from home, there were not many expenses (2: 21)” showing that although there are considerable gaps in the teaching and learning processes, these are going to take some time, because first we must consolidate aspects related to the being of each and every one of the students, strengthening self-concept, and establishing work dynamics that allow a balance in all areas of human development.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings allow inferring that in the educational field, the return to face-to-face teaching poses important challenges for teachers, because, despite the advances and strategies generated by the different educational institutions to cope with the pandemic and virtual education, the conceptual and theoretical gaps in the students are significant, which makes the learning process a slow dynamic that requires retaking pre-knowledge and thus consolidating thinking schemes.

Although teachers have tried to retake the learning rhythm, the dynamics brought about by the sanitary measures have harmed the feelings of the students regarding their learning process, and a lack of interest in learning has been observed, ratified by the overflowing consumption of social networks and the new cultures that this has imposed. Because of this, strategies must be sought to link these new social spaces of digital nature with the enjoyment of knowledge, its epiphanies and its possibilities. This involves the strengthening of autonomy and methods that do not require a traditional learning process but are demarcated by innovation.

In this sense, the conception of the teacher must evolve, having as a fundamental basis the current reality of the society he expects to educate, which leads to the need to establish spaces for training and qualification in methodological aspects that allow implementing learning experiences focused on the development of skills and competencies that have an impact on the use of the digital society responsibly and ratified in school autonomy and strategies designed to strengthen the learning pace of schoolchildren.

The pandemic revealed the social gap that exists in all areas nationwide, showing the difficulty that some people have to access the space where every citizen has access by right that the state must offer and protect. In this sense, it was evidenced that those people who did not have access to digital devices to continue with their teaching and learning process were isolated, left adrift and without the possibility of qualifying their competencies equitably with each of the sectors of society, an issue that within the return to the presentiality has left those people unprotected by the state with multiple gaps and barriers to face from the role of teachers who are trained within the degree programs.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the competencies that are acquired within the formative processes of teachers at the professional level imply multiple challenges that in themselves can respond, given that the research sponsors the holistic analysis of the context, the curricular modifiability implies new strategies that from the didactics are related to the digitalization of society, school dynamism requires that playfulness is an aspect that demarcates teaching and the establishment of new theoretical parameters that respond to the needs of today's society, facing the challenges that are being presented in the teaching-learning process of this country.

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