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What's your image of the child? Examining trajectories of prospective ECE teachers' beliefs during practicum

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ABSTRACT

Research literature acknowledges the influential role of teachers' beliefs on their interpretations, decision-making and pedagogical practices. It also suggests that initial teacher education (ITE) plays a relevant role in explicitly addressing beliefs that students hold. This study aims to examine beliefs about the child of prospective early childhood education (ECE) teachers at two stages of their ITE, before and after completing field-based practicum. Thirty-four students attending a professional Master in ECE participated in the study. Students' written narratives on the image of the child were collected in both stages, with data analysis allowing for the emergence of eight categories. Changes in the image of the child were identified, with a tendency towards a more agentic, non-universalistic, rights-based perspective about the child at the end of the practicum, but also the persistence of beliefs less responsive to children's rights. Implications are drawn on the relevance of recursive praxeological dialogues among beliefs, practices and theories in ECE teacher education programmes.

KEYWORDS

Image of the child; prospective ECE teachers' beliefs; early childhood teacher education; practicum; praxeological approach

Introduction

Literature on teaching and teachers' education has been emphasizing the impact of the beliefs these professionals hold on their perceptions, interpretations, decision-making and practice (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015; Blömeke, Dunekacke, and Jenßen 2017). Nevertheless, teachers' beliefs persist as a complex and even controversial construct. According to Pajares (1992), beliefs are defined as values with evaluative, comparative and judgmental functions. Richardson argues that beliefs are 'psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world, that are felt to be true' (1996, 103). Beliefs are seldom considered cognitive and dispositional filters (Kim and Han 2015) through which teachers screen their classroom experiences, perceive and interpret them, and adapt their subsequent practices (Wilcox-Herzog 2002).

The review of the literature carried out by Flores and Day (2006) highlights the major role of prospective teachers' beliefs and ideas prior to entering teaching in the ways they approach classroom practices and think about themselves as teachers. According to Flores (2010), prospective teachers hold a set of beliefs and ideas about teaching and

about what it means to be a teacher that they internalized throughout their school trajectory. Drawing on the concept of Lortie, the author stresses that this 'latent culture' is (re)activated during ITE and persists during professional practice. Although research focusing on the association between beliefs and practices have revealed mixed results (Kim and Han 2015; Mohamed and Al-Qaryouti 2016; Wilcox-Herzog 2002), researchers tend to agree on the need for teacher education to focus on how beliefs about teaching are acquired, maintained and modified (Kim and Han 2015). Biesta, Priestley and Robinson argue that teacher education may have become mainly instrumentally focused and raise the question about the extent to which students *are exposed to and have the opportunity to engage with a range of educational discourses and discursive repertoires* (2015, 638). Against this background, some authors highlight the need to create spaces for beliefs and representations to become explicit and to be questioned in a grounded and consistent way (Flores 2010; Oliveira-Formosinho and Formosinho 2012).

This article focuses on the beliefs that candidate ECE teachers hold about children, taking into consideration their potential influence on learning experiences and pedagogical practices. Specifically, it examines students' images of the child, recognizing the need to turn explicit and question these images as a core component of ECE professionalization programmes.

Beliefs about children in early childhood teacher education

The presupposition that ECE teachers' image of the child influences their attitudes and practices is shared by different authors and empirical findings. According to Brownlee and colleagues (2000), (naïve) beliefs about caring for and teaching young children developed earlier in life may be more difficult to change and may influence the acquisition of new knowledge. This primacy effect can result in teachers' inability to justify their actions from a theoretical standpoint or in a mismatch between rhetoric and practices. The review of the literature carried out by Salamon and Harrison (2015) showed that teachers' conceptions of preschool children's abilities influence their behaviour towards children and have powerful implications for children's educational experiences. The authors' study on early childhood educators working with infants showed that their conceptions of infants' capabilities influenced their practices and, ultimately, what infants may become capable of.

Prior research has mainly focused on students' beliefs about children at the beginning of the ECE teacher education programme. The study carried out by Avgitidou, Pnevmatikos, and Likomitrou (2013) analysed the beliefs and intuitive theories about the childhood of 316 preservice early childhood teachers at the beginning of their 4-year university programme. Analyses of students' written texts allowed for the definition of six factors: (i) the joyful and playful child; (ii) the lively and spontaneous child; (iii) the innocent child; (iv) children as agents; (v) the minor child; (vi) the immature child. Researchers pointed out that most preservice teachers considered childhood as a homogeneous and universal category, not differentiating children based on their characteristics. Conclusions emphasized that the ontological and epistemological presuppositions that students held might influence their understanding of scientific theories and might also constitute an obstacle in the realization of children's participation in ECE.

Recently, the study conducted in Finland by Niikko (2020) on kindergarten teacher students' images of children at the beginning of teacher education showed that students carried traditional and stereotypical images of children, but also of teachers, pedagogy and the physical environment. Although students characterized children as cheerful and active, a significant number highlighted teacher-led activities, while children sat, listened to the teacher and answered questions. Numerous students also emphasized the joint participation of teacher and children in activities, as well as the role of the teacher as a guide of children's activities. The study conducted by Garvis, Fluckiger, and Twigg (2011) on the beliefs of beginning pre-service ECE teachers suggested that some students had a romanticized view of early childhood education that lacked an understanding of the complexity of the profession.

The influence that early childhood teacher education programmes can have on teachers' beliefs has been a domain of concern in the ECE research field, both in preservice and in-service initiatives. Wilcox-Herzog (2002) argues that teachers' beliefs and behaviours may not proceed in a linear fashion and that it is important to obtain a working knowledge of the thoughts and behaviours of teachers at varying stages in their careers. Moreover, as pointed out by Clark (2005), professional training favours particular views of the child or childhood, either as vulnerable and in need or as active and competent.

While addressing the universities' role in preparing the future early years' workforce, Rekalidou and Panitsides (2015) stated that teacher education programmes have been found to exert a major influence on prospective teachers' pedagogical beliefs. Some empirical findings reinforce this idea. For example, results from the study by Recchia and Shin (2010) on an infant practicum course showed that working with infants allowed the preservice teachers to re-think their existing beliefs about infants' needs, capacities and capabilities, which contributed to transform students' sense of themselves as early childhood teachers.

Overall, researchers have been emphasizing the need for preservice ECE programmes to create opportunities for students to acknowledge and question their own beliefs and social dominant discourses about childhood (Avgitidou, Pnevmatikos, and Likomitrou 2013), reconstruct naïve beliefs (Brownlee et al. 2000) and embrace a critical thinking approach throughout the preservice teacher programme (Kim and Han 2015). Practicum experiences have been recognized as particularly influential, allowing for systematic observation and reflection (Avgitidou, Pnevmatikos, and Likomitrou 2013; Brownlee et al. 2000; Recchia and Shin 2010; Salamon and Harrison 2015) within an inquiry-based approach (e.g. Ceballos, Saiz-Linares, and Susinos-Rada 2021) that can sustain the deconstruction and reconstruction of students' beliefs.

While some studies have addressed prospective ECE teachers' beliefs about children and childhood at the beginning of the study's programme, there is scant evidence on the course of these beliefs throughout preservice education. Recently, Niikko (2020) pointed out the need to examine changes on the images of students within the same study programme at different stages of the learning process.

Against this background, this study aims to examine the beliefs about the child of prospective ECE teachers at two stages of their professional learning, before and after the ECE practicum. The study intends to answer the following overarching research questions: (i) What are the beliefs about the child of prospective early childhood teachers, before and after the completion of the practicum? (ii) What changes can be identified in these beliefs throughout the practicum?

Method

Participants and context of the practicum

This study involved the participation of 34 female students enrolled in a professional Master in Early Childhood Education in a Portuguese higher education institution (HEI), with ages ranging from 21 to 34 years. A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants. All of the participants were enrolled full-time in the programme, although five had the status of student-worker (three working in commercial activities and two working as ECE assistants). All of the students had completed a Bachelor degree in Basic Education and the first semester of the master's programme.

In Portugal, ECE initial professional studies follow a sequential model comprising a Bachelor's (6 semesters) and a Master's degree (3 or 4 semesters). In accordance with the legal framework that regulates ITE (Decree-Law 79/2014), the curriculum of ECE professional Masters is focused on two key components: *subject-specific didactics* (minimum of 24 ECTS) and *supervised educational practice* (minimum of 39 ECTS). The Master programme in which the study was carried out comprises two periods of practicum, in infant-toddler centres and preschools, respectively, for a total of 360 h. A triadic model of supervision is used, wherein students are supported by experienced early childhood educators and supervisors from the HEI. Practicum experiences include observation, oral and written reflection, the supported experimentation of socio-constructivist pedagogical proposals, on-site supervision and feedback, field-based journals and portfolios. Research processes are developed throughout the practicum, supported by a curricular unit of Research in Education. The plan of studies also integrates a curricular unit of Early Childhood Education Methodologies, prior to the practicum, in which participatory and socio-constructivist approaches for ECE are presented and discussed, strongly rooted on the pedagogical legacy of Malaguzzi, Dewey, Vygotsky, Freinet and Goldschmied. The pedagogical ideas of Formosinho and Formosinho on early childhood pedagogy as being *organised around knowledge built on situated action and infused with theories and beliefs [...] in an interactive and constantly renewed triangulation* (2016, 27) also constitute a core theoretical underpinning in students' pedagogical preparation.

Data collection and data analyses

Data was collected through students' written narratives in two phases: before and after completion of the practicum. According to Bold (2012), using narratives in social research can help people to construct and make sense of their social world, encourage reflexivity and provide useful insights into personal and professional development. Also, Flores and Ferreira (2016) recognize written narratives as means to listen to higher education pupils' views and experiences about the way the school and the curriculum affect their lives, learning and motivation, within a broader discussion about the ethical, social and cultural dimensions in ITE programmes. Furthermore, written narratives have been used in research as an adequate way to collect data on future teachers' beliefs about children and childhood (e.g. Avgitidou, Pnevmatikos, and Likomitrou 2013; Niikko 2020).

In both phases of data collection, students were informed about the aims of the study and their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was given, and confidentiality and anonymization were assured. The students were asked to answer a single question, inspired by Malaguzzi's text (1994) and aligned with the study's aims: *What's your image of the child?* (*Qual é a tua imagem de criança?*) No limitations of extension or time were imposed. Thirty-nine written narratives were collected before the practicum and the same number was collected after the practicum. In order to pair the students in both phases, five written narratives were excluded in each one of the phases. The final data set integrated 68 written narratives, 34 in each of the phases. The extension of the written narratives collected before the practicum ranged from 38 to 280 words, with an average of 125 words, while the extension of the written narratives collected after the practicum ranged from 74 to 661 words, with an average of 283 words. These narratives were transcribed *verbatim* and a code was attributed to each one (e.g. WN-BP_1: Written Narrative-Before Practicum_1; WN-AP_1: Written Narrative-After Practicum_1).

Students' written texts were subjected to content analysis following Bardin (2008) three phases (pre-analysis, material exploration, and treatment of results, inference and interpretation), by three coders: two researchers with experience in ECE teacher education and an ECE teacher. Categories definition and labelling were established in dialogue with theoretical underpinnings, namely the typologies proposed by James, Jenks, and Prout (1998), and the beliefs identified by Avgitidou, Pnevmatikos, and Likomitrou (2013). Reliability of the analyses was certified by an inter-coder agreement, with all contentious codes discussed until full agreement. The search for trustworthiness also encompassed the systematic reflexivity of the researcher (Lincoln and Guba 2000), built on the interaction among several elements, including the professional biography and the theoretical perspectives endorsed (Denzin and Lincoln 2000).

Findings

Eight categories were identified in students' written narratives, in both phases of data collection, as depicted in Table 1.

Further analysis showed that the eight identified categories were differentially represented in students' written discourses, before and after completion of the practicum. Table 2 shows the results for each category in the two phases.

Results indicate that, before the practicum, two categories were more represented in students' narratives, 'the child as a developing being' and 'the child as an agent'. Thus, more than half of the students described the child within an early developmental path and/or as a latent subject, waiting to become. Yet, approximately half of the students endorsed an image of the child as competent and active.

Three categories took an intermediate position in students' narratives, 'the curious child', 'the passive child' and 'the innocent child'. Thus, one-third of the students' narratives mirrored an image of the child associated with ideas of curiosity, discovery and inquiry, as illustrated in the excerpt presented in Table 1. A similar number of students characterized the child as passive and dependent on external orientations, especially the adult. One-third of the participants referred to the child's innocent nature, encompassing ideas of innocence, purity and natural goodness, as illustrated in the fragment depicted in Table 1. Three categories were less represented in students' discourses. Thus, eight

Table 1. Categories identified in students' written narratives.

Category	Excerpts
The child as an agent	'[Children are] active citizens and constructors of knowledge, [...] with agency, participative and able to make decisions on matters that concern them. Therefore, the child is a person with a voice. Realizing this changed my practice! [...] I have no doubt that children are able to build their knowledge and learning through concrete and meaningful experiences'. (WN-AP_16)
The child as a developing being	'In my perspective a child is a being that is at an early stage of life and therefore in a crucial stage of formation of personality and that's why she is so vulnerable and fragile [...] Today's child is also the citizen of tomorrow, the "raw material" of a future society that may prove to be as best as the investment made in her during this first stage'. (WN-BP_12)
The child as a subject of rights	'For me, a child should have the right to his/her childhood, to play, to various experiences that promote and develop knowledge, to emotional and family support, among others' (WN-BP_18)
The child as a unique being	'For me, a child is a unique, original and unrepeatable human being. It is a being endowed with a concrete history and full of experiences and knowledge'. (WN-BP_20)
The creative child	'[...] and, above all, creative. In a child's mind anything can happen, there is no room for limits and this makes the world so much more fulfilling and colourful'. (WN-AP_33)
The curious child	'By this I mean that the child is someone who has an inquiring attitude, who always wants to know everything, that questions on various topics of her personal interest, that has a great desire to be involved in different activities'. (WN-BP_10)
The innocent child	'At this stage, children are very fragile, innocent and also reveal a very high level of sincerity'. (WN-BP_30)
The passive child	'This is the most important phase because it's when the personality is shaped, depending on the environment and the people around it'. (WN-BP_21)

students referred to 'the creative child', a category conveying ideas of creativity, imagination, fantasy and creation, and seven students characterized 'the child as a unique being', an image of the child as unique, singular, with specific and individualized characteristics (needs, interests, motivations, rhythms) (cf., excerpt in Table 1). Notably, the least represented category was the 'the child as a subject of rights', identified in three narratives.

The results from students' narratives after practicum (Table 2) showed that the category 'the child as an agent' was the most salient, identified in almost three-thirds of the narratives. Although the analysis of individual experiences of change is outside the scope of this article, some narratives collected at this stage of the ITE programme show the reflection of the student on her own trajectory towards a more agentic image of the child, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Since the last time I presented my image of the child, I observed, reflected and rethought a lot about this image. So, for me, a child is an active, competent being. The child is part of the educational action, participates in it, not as a passive being that only listens, but as an agent.

Table 2. Results by category before and after practicum ($N = 34$).

Categories	<i>F</i>	
	Before practicum	After practicum
The child as an agent	16	25
The child as a developing being	19	10
The child as a subject of rights	3	11
The child as a unique being	7	12
The creative child	8	5
The curious child	12	8
The innocent child	10	2
The passive child	11	2

The child is a capable being, who shouldn't be judged as fragile (as I did), but as a co-builder of knowledge. The child has a voice that must be heard by the educator, because only then can he/she respond to the needs, interests and rights of the child. Thus, the educator is the adult who accompanies and guides the child when she needs it. Contrary to what I thought, the child is not a dependent being, she is a curious being, researcher, active, capable of participating in the educational experience and of creating learning opportunities. (WN-AP_11)

The category 'the child as a unique being' was identified in nearly one-third of the narratives, while a similar number of students expressed a perspective of 'the child as a subject of rights', as in the following fragment:

The child is a human being with rights. The right to be happy, to be loved, to be valued and listened. ([...] Children have the right to explore, to relate, to live happily. [...] The child has the right to play, to pretend to be, to refuse to do, to want to do, to choose. The child has rights that must be respected and valued. (WN-AP_20)

Notably, one-third of the students still expressed ideas about 'the child as a developing being' at the end of practicum. At this stage, the least represented categories in students' written narratives were 'the creative child' and, particularly, 'the innocent child' and 'the passive child', the latter illustrated in the following excerpt:

A child can be compared to a drawing, once we are drawing a sketch of who we are in children, leaving them something of ours, that can be completed over time, with new learning and characteristics. (WN-AP_13)

Overall, a particularly noteworthy increase was identified in two categories, 'the child as an agent' and 'the child as a subject of rights'. Thus, the results indicate that, at the end of the practicum, more students showed a belief in children as capable of acting upon the world, of influencing the learning process and being motivated to experiment and learn. Also, more students held an image of the child as a person with rights. Furthermore, a larger number of students also characterized the child as a unique being, with specific and individualized characteristics. A visible decrease was identified in three categories after completion of the supervised field-based practicum: fewer students characterized the child within a developmental path, as a passive being that is dependent on the adult, and as an innocent and pure being.

Discussion

The present study sought to examine the beliefs that prospective ECE teachers held before and after the practicum, which is deemed as the core component of their professional preparation at the Master level. The study allowed for the identification of eight categories that were differentially represented in students' discourses in both phases.

The category 'the child as an agent' was one of the most represented categories in students' discourse before practicum and the most represented after practicum. A similar image was identified in the studies of Avgitidou and colleagues (2013) and Niikko (2020), at the beginning of students' professional preparation. The present study adds to previous evidence, suggesting that the recognition of children as agents is more robust in students' discourses after completion of the practicum. The same tendency

was identified regarding the category ‘the child as a unique being’. Findings suggest a progression towards a more differentiated and individualized image of the child throughout students’ practicum. Students seem more sensitive and aware of children’s singularity in what concerns their needs, interests, motivations and rhythms.

An inverse tendency was identified regarding the category ‘the child as a developing being’, the most represented in students’ narratives before the practicum. This category includes characteristics of two pre-sociological images suggested by James, Jenks, and Prout (1998): (i) the naturally developing child, which emphasizes the belief, influenced by the work of Jean Piaget, of *the universal experience of being a child*, and (ii) the immanent child, full of potential as future citizen and as imperfect rational beings, but in a latent stage. It also draws associations with an image of children as redemptive agents able to rescue society from its problems if they are given the right start (Moss and Dahlberg 2008). This conception of the child was also identified in the study carried out by Avgitidou and colleagues (2013) with Greek students. Indeed, the ‘immature child’ was one of the conceptions that emerged from their analysis, contrasting, according to the authors, with the mature adult period of human life. In the present study, the number of students whose beliefs endorsed a sense of children’s singularity followed an inverse tendency of the number of students with a universalistic view of the child, higher in the first case and lower in the latter case. Thus, the perspectives of a part of the students seem to have undergone a trajectory towards a worldview of children as ‘beings not becomings’ (Qvortrup 1994, 2).

One of the most visible changes concerns the category ‘the child as a subject of rights’, from a marginal representation before the practicum to a more evident presence after its completion. The explicit reference to children’s rights on students’ discourses provides a nexus to the image of the child as a democratic citizen, strongly rooted, among others, on the ideas of Loris Malaguzzi (1994), one of the core underpinnings of students’ preparation. Thus, the evolution identified in students’ discourses may represent an assumption closer to a citizenship based on children’s rights, that is particularly sensitive for children’s experiences in ECE settings (Formosinho and Passos 2019; Mac Naughton, Hughes, and Smith 2007). Considering the image of the child proposed by Malaguzzi, which clearly underlines creativity and curiosity as core ‘powers’ of the child, the results on the categories ‘the creative child’ and ‘the curious child’ should be carefully considered. Indeed, fewer references to these two characteristics were identified in narratives after the completion of the practicum.

Results also indicate that, before practicum, one-third of the students characterized children as passive. This corroborates earlier empirical work carried out by Niikko (2020), in which a significant number of kindergarten teacher students characterized the main activities of children as sitting, listening to the teacher and answering questions. In the study by Avgitidou and colleagues (2013), 20,4% of preservice teachers answered that children were not able to decide and 50% that children were able to make decisions but under certain preconditions (e.g., adult’s supervision), mirroring an emphasis on children’s limitations to act as capable and autonomous decision-makers. After practicum, students’ narratives revealed a different panorama, with a visible decrease of the category ‘the passive child’. This result is perceived as positive in the preparation of these ECE teachers, especially considering the increasing references in students’ narratives to ‘the child as an agent’.

The view of the child as innocent was also marginally represented at the end of the practicum. In the study carried out by Avgitidou and colleagues (2013), the image of the ‘innocent child’, as expressed by Rousseau, was also identified. An idealized or romanticized view of early childhood education of beginning preservice teachers also emerged in the study by Garvis, Fluckiger, and Twigg (2011), suggesting a ‘deficit’ view and a lack of understanding of the complexity of ECE profession.

Overall, changes were identified between the two stages, before and after the practicum. The students increasingly expressed ideas about the child as an agent and a subject of rights, and decreasingly represented the child as a developing being, passive and innocent, which appear as promising trajectories. Indeed, these changes are critical given the potential influence of teachers’ beliefs on the acquisition of new knowledge (Brownlee et al. 2000), on pedagogical practices (Blömeke, Dunekacke, and Jenßen 2017; Salamon and Harrison 2015) and on realizing children’s participation in ECE (Avgitidou, Pnevmatikos, and Likomitrou 2013).

We can tentatively assert that, throughout the practicum experience, candidate ECE teachers had the opportunity for experiential professional learning that allowed them to reflect on the image of the child that they held. Indeed, practicum experiences have been recognized in research as influential in challenging existing beliefs about children. However, changes are dependent on opportunities for systematic observation and reflection by the student (Avgitidou, Pnevmatikos, and Likomitrou 2013; Brownlee et al. 2000; Salamon and Harrison 2015), and on the quality of support from mentors (Recchia and Shin 2010). In the case under analysis, a set of pedagogical strategies was used prior and throughout the practicum in order to create contextualized and recursive praxeological encounters among beliefs, knowledge and practice(s) (Oliveira-Formosinho and Formosinho 2012; Formosinho and Formosinho 2016). Firstly, the socio-constructivist pedagogical approaches that sustained students’ preparation emphasized an image of the child as a person with rights, competent and participant. This image of the child is deeply interconnected with an image of the ECE teacher as a (co)creator of opportunities for such an image of the child to be fully realized in daily life. Throughout the practicum, these images served as a pedagogical compass, influencing core processes such as observation, experimentation and reflection. The students were encouraged to experiment and reflect on socio-constructivist pedagogical proposals that emphasized agentic images of the child. This was the case of heuristic play (Goldschmied and Jackson 1994) and project approach (Dewey 1910; Edwards, Gandini, and Forman 1998). The students were also encouraged to narrate and reflect critically on their experiences through oral and written narratives, field-based journals and portfolios. A triadic model of on-site supervision (Dalrymple, Kemp, and Smith 2014) was adopted, which sustained the development of mentoring processes involving the collaborative work of teachers from the HEI, ECE teachers and students. Indeed, the role of mentors is critical in debating students’ beliefs, demanding special attention to their pedagogical preparation, as well as to the quality of placement institutions (Recchia and Shin 2010).

We may hypothesize that these processes created opportunities for renewed situated understandings of the image of the child, mirrored in students’ recomposed discursive repertoire. Indeed, the systematic observation and listening of children in context, the discussion and reflection on students’ assumptions and interpretations are opportunities for preservice students to acknowledge, question, confront their own beliefs and social

dominant discourses (Avgitidou, Pnevmatikos, and Likomitrou 2013; Ceballos, Saiz-Linares, and Susinos-Rada 2021).

Notably, at the end of the practicum, not all students' narratives mirrored the world-views of children (Papatheodorou 2010) responsive to their rights. Indeed, the internalization of beliefs and values has a long trajectory, strongly rooted in personal and educational experiences (Araújo 2012; Brownlee et al. 2000; Flores 2010). Moreover, because beliefs rely on evaluative and affective components, they may be tenaciously held in the face of contradictory evidence (Ashton 2014), which can generate inner conflicts and tensions during practicum (Recchia and Shin 2010). The processes of acknowledging, questioning and revising these beliefs are complex and demand time, personal commitment and professional learning experiences that allow for the situated regeneration of pedagogical beliefs. In Portugal, the legal framework for teacher professionalization stipulates a sequential model in which the practicum is located at the final phase of education programmes, at the Master level, with a minimum of ECTS allocated to professional practice during the first three years of ITE. This model may hinder the opportunities for involving students in research processes (Flores 2011, 2015), including experiences to question, contest or confirm values and beliefs.

Conclusion

The research literature has been addressing the need to investigate changes in teachers' beliefs, recognizing the complexity and power of the human belief systems in promoting or hindering development and learning (Ashton 2014; Pajares 1992). This study aimed to examine beliefs about the child of prospective ECE teachers, before and after practicum, and identify changes between both stages. It is intended to add to existing research on future ECE teachers' beliefs in ITE programmes and, specifically, to contribute to fill a gap in research literature addressing the changes in the images of students at different stages of the same study programme.

Results suggest that the image of the child as an agent, a subject of rights, singular in her motivations, needs and rhythms was reinforced in students' discourses at the end of the practicum. Inversely, at this later stage, a decrease was identified in students' tendency to characterize the child as passive and innocent. The changes that the study documents can be understood within candidate ECE teachers' trajectories towards an image of the child that is more ethical, respectful and potentially influential on the creation of multiple possibilities for children's well-being, participation and learning in ECE contexts. Nonetheless, the study also acknowledges the persistence, in a smaller number of students, of beliefs less responsive to children's rights. This may point for the need, in the Portuguese context, for earlier experiential and reflexive opportunities for debating beliefs and values that students hold, in the ITE programmes (specially, at the level of the bachelor degree).

Although a linear attribution of such changes to the practicum is not advisable, we hypothesize that the experiential and reflexive nature of the practicum, along with the praxeological approach that underpins it, could have constituted an arena for students' beliefs to become explicit, to be interrogated and reconstructed, in a situated and grounded way. Thus, implications of this study for the professionalization at the master level point to the core role of participatory and socio-constructivist theoretical

underpinnings, as well as the creation of opportunities for critical reflection that integrates beliefs, knowledge and practice(s) in a coherent way. For this, the pedagogical preparation of mentors and the quality of the placement institutions are also critical.

Triangulating the results of this study with data generated during the practicum (e.g., field-based journals, portfolios, practicum reports) and in-depth interviews could shed light on its influence on students' beliefs and values. Additionally, further analyses can be carried out of individual experiences of change, pairing each student's narratives in different moments of their learning trajectory. Finally, because inconsistencies can be identified between beliefs and practices (Brownlee et al. 2000; Davis and Degotardi 2015; Nóvoa 1999), future research should address the nexus between prospective ECE teachers' beliefs about the child and their projections on pedagogical practices.

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