

# The role of psychologists in early childhood education is essential, but the field lacks professional framework

Alexandre Briozo Gomes Filho / 17 de outubro de 2024 / In English



## Human Development | Master's thesis points out that aspects such as low appreciation and work overload make it difficult for psychology professionals to remain in early childhood education

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\*Photo: Freepik

Early childhood is a central period for human development. During this phase, which lasts until six years of age, the institutions of family and school play a crucial role in the formation of the individual. In the school environment, psychology has studied that the presence of psychologists alongside teachers can prevent developmental issues, enhancing health and well-being actions that will reverberate throughout a human's life. Promulgated in December 2019, Law n.º 13.935 provides psychological and social assistance services in public basic education schools. At the time of its promulgation, the text stipulated that the education systems would have one year to comply with its regulations. In practice, the law is, almost four years later, still in its "crawling doorstep".

Highlighting the importance of psychology professionals in early childhood education, a master's thesis from the Graduate Program in Psychology at UFRGS analyzed the contribution of psychologists working in this area to the promotion of psychosocial development in childhood. Psychologist Samanta Wessel, the author of the research, emphasizes the lack of studies on the subject and the scarcity of professionals directed to this field. "Just as teachers do not have specific training to work in this area of Early Childhood Education, we also lack this initial training," she says. The lack of encouragement for continuous training in Early Childhood Education is also a problem.

Before starting her master's training, Samanta had already been working as a psychologist for seven years. One of her lines of work was school psychology. It was through her work in Early Childhood Education schools that she realized the importance of the topic addressed in her research. Her systemic approach, which considers the family and the school environment in the child's development, is a core topic for the research group she is part of, the Center for Studies on Families and Educational and Social Institutions (NEFIES). The group is coordinated by her master's supervisor, Professor Angela Helena Marin of the UFRGS Psychology Graduate Program.

### Lack of Professional Framework

The study was conducted in two stages. The first, qualitative, consisted of interviews with six psychologists. In a field with few professionals, the applied methodology was the "snowball" strategy, where participants appoint fellow-psychologists they know who may be available to collaborate. In the second stage, which was quantitative, a multiple-choice questionnaire was developed, accessed online by 53 professionals. Data from the first stage were used to gain a deeper understanding of the reality reported by the psychologists. "We sought to access all regions of the country, talking to faculty members, research participants, regional psychology councils' associates. Many councils sent out our research to their registered psychologists," says the author. The research targeted professionals who had been working in Early Childhood Education for more than a year.

Getting access to the participants was the biggest difficulty Samanta faced throughout the study, as many psychologists are civil servants inserted in diverse career plans. "For example, I am a municipal psychologist and, at the municipality, I serve health, social assistance, or education fields, but I don't see myself as an education psychologist, as a school psychologist working in Early Childhood Education. I see myself as a municipal psychologist," she says about what she has experienced when her invitation to other professionals to participate in the study has fallen unanswered: "Maybe many fellow-psychologists received the invitation to participate, but did not feel suited because this professional framework does not exist."

"Being a school psychologist, a psychologist working in the early childhood area has not been strengthened as a path career"  
— Samanta Wessel

### Barriers to Overcome

Not only does the lack of professional recognition represent an obstacle to the advancement of psychologists' work in Early Childhood Education. The barriers preventing psychologists from reaching the entire school community are structural. They include the lack of time for the professional, who sometimes works only four hours at the institution; the excess of children for the workload; and, additionally, the institutions' resistance to allowing psychologists to be involved in professional relationships, such as the educator's mental state and their training. Instead, the institution ends up directing the professional's service to individualized care for children, which, according to Samanta, is not the goal. "Our focus is to do network institutional work," she explains.

The workload of these professionals, combined with the low encouragement of the area, often leads the few working in this field to quit - "within a three-year time, often," reports Samanta. Thus, psychologists seek additional training, such as clinical psychology or even school psychology, but focused on other areas that will bring more benefits, including financial, in the long run. Faced with the invisibility of the work carried out by psychologists in Early Childhood Education, Samanta is still impressed by the interviewees' testimonials. "They all mentioned at the end: 'Wow, it's great to have this moment to talk about our work because it never happens, I had never talked to anyone about what I do!'" After all, those who so frequently listen to others also need to be listened to.

Among the issues raised by the research, the psychologist believes that strengthening the discussion around the need to implement Law No. 13,935 is one of the dissertation's contributions. "[The presence of the psychologist] is urgent at all stages of schooling," she emphasizes.

### A Baby on the Way

Being granted a master's degree is a dream-come-true realization for Samanta, accomplished at a rare and precious moment: pregnancy. Expecting a baby, she says the research will have to wait. But sharing the knowledge gained during this journey with other professionals is part of her plans for the future. Specialization in early childhood education and family-school interaction also figure among the possibilities awaiting her.

"I now hope to repay society, the schools where I worked, and other institutions, and many professionals who are starting and are in this area. This has great value to me, this feeling of being able to contribute from a concern that I saw was shared"  
— Samanta Wessel

Translated into English by **Gustavo Flores Ramos**, undergraduate student enrolled in the course "Supervised Translation Training I (English)" of the Undergraduate Program in Language and Literature, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Elizamari R. Becker (P.h.D.) - IL/UFRGS.

### :: Read in portuguese:

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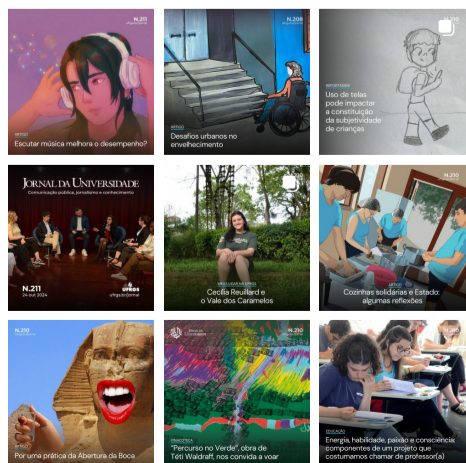
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