Artigo Original

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"EVERYTHING I DO COMES FROM THE HEART"[1]: THE EMOTIONAL LABOUR OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN DAY CARE SETTINGS

"Tudo o que faço passa pelo coração": o trabalho emocional das educadoras de infância em creche

"Todo lo que hago pasa por el corazón": el trabajo emocional de las educadoras de la primera infancia en guarderías

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RESUMO
Este artigo analisa o trabalho emocional de educadoras de infância em creche, com base em entrevistas a 30 profissionais em Portugal. Embora essencial à prática pedagógica, este trabalho permanece invisível na formação, nas políticas e nas instituições. A abordagem interpretativa revela quatro temas centrais: contenção emocional, invisibilidade, desgaste e ausência de espaços de escuta. As educadoras regulam constantemente as suas emoções para garantir ambientes seguros, muitas vezes sem reconhecimento ou apoio. Este trabalho é naturalizado, associado ao género e romantizado como vocação. Sustenta-se que o trabalho emocional é central à identidade profissional e à qualidade pedagógica. O artigo defende o seu reconhecimento formal e apela à transformação das práticas organizacionais. Cuidar de quem cuida é um ato político e ético. Em jogo está a dignidade e o bem-estar de quem educa.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Trabalho emocional. Educação de infância. Contextos de creche. Identidade profissional. Bem-estar das educadoras.

ABSTRACT
This article examines the emotional labour of early childhood educators in day care settings, based on interviews with 30 professionals in Portugal. Although essential to pedagogical practice, this labour remains largely invisible in training, policy, and institutional contexts. The interpretative approach reveals four key themes: emotional containment, invisibility, exhaustion, and lack of spaces for listening. Educators constantly regulate their emotions to ensure emotionally secure environments, often without recognition or support. This labour is naturalised, gendered, and romanticised as a vocation. The article argues that

[1]The title of the article comes directly from the words of an early childhood educator who participated in the interviews. Her words express, with simplicity and depth, an awareness that pedagogical practice in day-care settings involves the whole body, but above all the emotional dimension. This excerpt seeks to value the invisible yet absolutely structural nature of the affective investment of the educators participating in the study and to affirm this work as a legitimate part of their professionalism.

emotional labour is central to professional identity and pedagogical quality. It calls for its formal recognition and a transformation of organisational practices. Caring for those who care is both a political and ethical act. At stake are the dignity and well-being of those who educate.
KEYWORDS: Emotional labour. Early childhood education and care. Day care settings. Professional identity. Educators' well-being.

RESUMEN
Este artículo analiza el trabajo emocional de las educadoras de la primera infancia en guarderías a partir de entrevistas con 30 profesionales en Portugal. Aunque es esencial para la práctica pedagógica, este trabajo sigue siendo poco visible en la formación, las políticas y las instituciones. El enfoque interpretativo identifica cuatro temas centrales: contención emocional, invisibilidad, desgaste y ausencia de espacios de escucha. Las educadoras regulan constantemente sus emociones para garantizar entornos seguros, muchas veces sin reconocimiento ni apoyo. Este trabajo se naturaliza, se asocia al género y se idealiza como vocación. Se sostiene que el trabajo emocional es central para la identidad profesional y la calidad pedagógica. El artículo defiende su reconocimiento formal y reclama una transformación de las prácticas organizativas. Cuidar a quienes cuidan es un acto político y ético. Están en juego la dignidad y el bienestar de quienes educan.
PALABRAS CLAVE: Trabajo emocional. Educación de la primera infancia. Guarderías. Identidad profesional. Bienestar de las educadoras.

INTRODUCTION

The everyday work of early childhood educators in day care settings involves physical, cognitive, organisational and, above all, emotional demands (Malhotra, 2022; Pre-School Learning Alliance [PLA], 2018).

Although day care is now recognised as an essential socio-educational setting during the first years of life (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020), the emotional labour undertaken by these professionals remains largely invisible in initial and continuing professional education, in the everyday organisation of institutions and in public policies (Boyd, 2013; Cameron; Moss, 2020; Whitebook; McLean, 2017).

Affective presence; managing relationships with babies and young children in situations of considerable dependence; emotional containment in the face of distress and instability; welcoming and engaging in everyday mediation with families, educational teams and other social actors: all these are central dimensions of their pedagogical work. Yet this dimension is rarely recognised as an integral part of teachers' professionalism (Elfer, 2012; Taggart, 2011; Malhotra, 2022).

As Boyd (2013) and Taggart (2011) argue, schools — and, by extension, day care settings — tend to value technical and operational competencies while overlooking relational and affective dimensions which, paradoxically, are fundamental to pedagogical practice with babies and young children.

This article seeks to make visible what is so often performed in silence: the emotional effort that sustains the "presence" inherent in pedagogical work in day care

settings — understood by Harwood et al. (2013), drawing on Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006), as:

> […] a state of alert awareness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environment, and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step (p. 265).

Drawing on a qualitative analysis centred on the voices of early childhood educators working in Portuguese day care settings, the article discusses emotional labour as a constitutive component of professional identity and professionalism in these socio-educational settings, examining its expressions, tensions and ethical, educational, political and social implications.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Hochschild (1983) was the first to put forward the idea that work cannot be reduced to the dichotomies of mind versus body and emotion versus reason: it may involve a complex interplay of emotions, requiring individuals to recognise, adjust and adapt those emotions in order to evoke feelings in themselves and others.

The concept of "emotional labour" was introduced by Hochschild (1983) to describe the effort required to manage emotions and feelings — one's own and those of others — in professional practice.

Although initially applied to sectors such as aviation and commercial sales, this concept has increasingly been adopted and developed within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), particularly in day care settings (e.g., Fairchild; Mikuska, 2021; Mikuska; Fairchild, 2020).

Hochschild (1983) argued that emotions are vital to successful human relationships and that emotional labour is "sold" and taken for granted in professions concerned with and centred on people.

It is also worth noting that, according to ethnopsychology (e.g., James, 1890; Lutz, 1990) — the interdisciplinary field concerned with how emotional experiences, whether emotions in general or specific emotions, are understood within a given sociocultural context — emotions have predominantly been associated with the feminine sphere. The ECEC workforce is overwhelmingly female, which helps perpetuate misleading perceptions and representations that both naturalise and render emotional

labour invisible as a central dimension of professionalism and professional identities in ECEC (Andrew, 2015; Campbell-Barr, 2017).

The notion that women naturally know how to care still profoundly shapes institutional and public perceptions of work in day care settings. This essentialist conception of femininity has tangible consequences: it justifies low pay, a lack of recognition and emotional overload (Campbell-Barr, 2017).

In these settings, care ceases to be seen as a professional practice and becomes an extension of the maternal role. As Aslanian (2018) and Mikuska and Fairchild (2020) argue, this romanticisation of affection obscures the complexity of the work and perpetuates symbolic and material inequalities within the profession.

As neuroscience has shown (e.g., Damásio, 1994, 1996, 2010), emotions play a central role in regulating action, memory and decision-making. Damásio's "somatic marker" hypothesis shows how emotional states guide adaptive responses in complex situations — such as pedagogical work in day care settings, where rapid, sensitive and ethical decisions intersect with intense affective bonds.

This challenges the view that emotional presence is innate or instinctive: it requires competencies that are learned, consciously developed and integrated into professional identity (Taggart, 2016; Malhotra, 2022).

International studies addressing emotional labour in ECEC (e.g., Elfer, 2012; Fairchild; Mikuska, 2021; Malhotra, 2022; Mikuska; Fairchild, 2020) approach it from different perspectives. Nevertheless, they all indicate that emotional labour in day care settings is not incidental but a foundational condition of pedagogical practice. Responding to children's crying, hunger, sleep needs, separation anxiety, fear of strangers and frustrations requires continuous emotional presence, which is often made invisible, naturalised or romanticised as instinct, vocation or a knack (Mikuska; Fairchild, 2020).

There is a historical tendency to associate work with babies and young children with a feminine nature. This naturalisation is rooted in gendered conceptions that associate care with femininity, contributing to the lack of recognition and the symbolic and material devaluation of the work these professionals undertake with babies, young children, their families and other professionals (Campbell-Barr, 2017; Malhotra, 2022; Mikuska; Fairchild, 2020).

The ways in which educators are trained and evaluated in many European settings reinforce an instrumental logic centred on observable outcomes and standardised quality criteria, which fail to take account of the emotional labour required

to ensure an environment of trust, attachment and emotional security for babies and young children (Cameron; Moss, 2020; Whitebook; McLean, 2017).

Tadeu and Lopes (2024), in turn, propose an ethical lens through which to consider emotional labour, understanding education as an affective, relational and ethical act in which listening, sensitivity and availability are as fundamental as technical expertise.

The devaluation of emotions is linked to a liberal conception of the educational subject, in which reason and technique prevail over relationships, affectivity and ethics. This (re)affirms that educating is always an affective, ethical and relational act — particularly with babies and young children, whose earliest language is expressed and communicated through the body and the gaze, in a kind of synchronised dance whose partner is the emotional presence of another: the early childhood educator (Aslanian, 2018; Elfer, 2012; Rodgers; Raider-Roth, 2006; Taggart, 2016).

This perspective therefore allows us to refocus the debate on professionalism, not on isolated competencies, but on the ability to sustain intentional pedagogical relationships — caring relationships (Tadeu; Lopes, 2024) — that are meaningful and ethical, with babies and young children who need care and protection without losing their agency[2], as well as with their families and other professionals.

Dependence on adult care does not, however, preclude recognising babies and young children as agents capable of expressing preferences, taking initiatives and actively participating in the construction of educational relationships (Tomás; Schmitt, 2026).

This context therefore invites us to understand early childhood educators' emotional labour as a professional, political and ethical dimension whose effects are felt in the body, in general well-being and physical and mental health, and in the construction of professional identities, in their relationship with the profession and in the quality of the education and care provided. Failing to recognise this dimension means failing to care for those who care — and that has consequences (Tadeu; Lopes, 2024).

[2]Babies' and young children's need for care and protection arises from their vulnerability and dependence on adults, which are particularly pronounced in the earliest stages of life. This does not prevent recognition of their agency, the initiatives they take and their active participation in educational relationships (Fernandes; Tomás, 2004; Tomás; Schmitt, 2026).

METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

This article presents a reanalysis of interviews conducted as part of a broader doctoral investigation (see Tadeu, 2024, for a full account) and is situated within a qualitative study grounded in an interpretative and relational understanding of knowledge production. The choice of a qualitative approach was framed by the paradigm of complexity (Morin, 2007) and guided by the central aim of accessing the subjective meanings attributed by early childhood educators[3] — all women — to their everyday emotional experiences in day care settings.

Thus, rather than describing observable practices, the intention was to listen to narratives, engage with the feelings recounted and gain access to the tensions experienced — and often silenced — that permeate their ways of being, thinking and acting as professionals.

To this end, individual interviews were conducted with 30 early childhood educators who volunteered to participate after contact had been made with institutions identified in official lists and initially selected at random by district and Autonomous Region. Each professional's interest and availability were confirmed before scheduling the interview.

The 30 participants worked in institutions located in nine districts of mainland Portugal and in the Autonomous Regions of the Azores and Madeira; they therefore did not belong to a single institution or network. They were aged between 26 and 55 (Md = 38; IQR = 35–43); 23 held a bachelor's degree and seven a master's degree, all having completed initial training in ECEC. Twenty-four worked in private social solidarity institutions and six in private for-profit institutions. Twenty-five combined several roles, and 18 also performed technical management and/or pedagogical coordination duties. Their professional experience in day care settings ranged from two to 25 years (Md = 10; IQR = 6–13).

It is important to distinguish the actual conditions of professional practice in baby rooms: of the 30 interviewees, five worked exclusively with one group of babies; one was responsible for two baby rooms and another for three. The remaining participants

[3]The use of feminine grammatical forms in the original Portuguese version reflects the fact that all participants in the study were women. This was an empirical and intentional choice, rather than a merely linguistic one.

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undertook monitoring and/or supervision of educational assistants' practices, frequently alongside other responsibilities.

The interviews followed a semi-structured guide addressing professional trajectories, pedagogical frameworks and professional practices. Emotional presence, the management of feelings and relationships with babies, families and teams were considered when interpreting the experiences recounted; the four themes of this article do not reproduce closed questions from the interview guide. Data were not collected on participants' contractual arrangements, working hours or salaries/remuneration. This absence limits the characterisation of these aspects of their working conditions.

The interviews were conducted individually between July and December 2020, online via Zoom because of restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, on dates and at times agreed in advance with the participants. They were audio- and video-recorded and lasted between 31 and 178 minutes (M = 77; SD = 39.97). The interview guide comprised three thematic blocks: socio-professional trajectories and education; pedagogical knowledge and frameworks; and pedagogical practice in baby rooms, concerning the educator's relationship with herself and with others. Open-ended questions were asked, such as "What does early childhood education mean to you?" and "What kinds of interactions do you have with babies and young children? For what purpose? And what competencies do you bring to those interactions?", followed by requests for clarification and further elaboration of the experiences recounted.

Data analysis, carried out through content analysis (Bardin, 1977/2011), followed a process of thematic coding and progressive categorisation, enabling the identification of recurring and divergent cores of meaning in participants' narratives. Listening was guided by ethical attentiveness to detail, seeking not to reduce the accounts to closed typologies but to understand the educators' experiences as singular expressions situated within broader structural contexts.

The interviews were transcribed *verbatim* and the analysis was supplemented with field notes. Only the transcripts were returned to participants, so that they could add, remove or correct information. The researcher undertook thematic coding using an initially deductive approach that remained open to emerging themes. Reading and rereading the data made it possible to identify, compare and organise recurring and divergent cores of meaning, supporting the definition of categories and subcategories. The four themes presented here thus emerged from the analysis of data concerning early childhood educators' emotional labour; they were neither categories nor specific questions in the interview guide.

The original data collection, in 2020, was guided by the principles of the then-current *Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association* (EECERA; Bertram et al., 2016), as well as those set out by the Associação de Profissionais de Educação de Infância (APEI; Portuguese Association of Early Childhood Education Professionals) in its *Carta de Princípios dos Associados da APEI para a Tomada de Decisão Eticamente Situada* (Charter of Principles of APEI Members for Ethically Situated Decision-Making, APEI, 2011). In the present reanalysis, the principles of the revised EECERA code (Bertram et al., 2024) were also considered, distinguishing the ethical frameworks guiding the original data collection from those informing the subsequent analysis.

All participants signed informed consent forms, ensuring voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, the exclusively academic purposes of the information collected and the freedom to withdraw at any point during the research.

Beyond formal safeguards, an ethics of care was sought within the researcher–participant relationship itself, creating a space for listening, validation and respect for the emotional depth of the accounts.

The research was also informed by a clear awareness that emotional labour is not merely an internal, private dimension of early childhood educators' lives but a relational and political product, shaped by dynamics of gender, precarity, invisibility and resistance. Listening to their voices is therefore also an ethical and political act.

The data collected were stored on a computer at the University's Research Centre, with restricted access to safeguard their security and confidentiality. Their retention after completion of the research project is governed by the scientific purposes justifying it, including the possibility of reanalysis, and by the applicable ethical and data protection principles.

Findings have progressively been shared with participants and disseminated to the wider scientific community as they have been produced, through written outputs (i.e., scientific articles and posters) and oral presentations at national and international conferences.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Emotional labour in day care settings: between containment, invisibility, exhaustion and the absence of listening

Analysis of the interview data revealed the centrality of emotional labour in the everyday practice of early childhood educators in day care settings. The accounts reflect different professional roles: for some educators, being present with a group in a baby room; for others, supporting practices and teams, sometimes alongside coordination responsibilities. In both cases, affective regulation and recognition of the work emerge as sources of tension, whose expression depends on the conditions under which each participant practises her profession.

Participants' accounts were organised around four main themes illustrating the complexity of this dimension of professional work: (1) emotional containment; (2) invisibility of affective labour; (3) exhaustion and silent resistance; and (4) lack of institutional spaces for listening.

Within each of the four themes, interview excerpts are interpreted in dialogue with the theoretical frameworks, in order to understand, in the situations described, the regulation of emotions, the invisibility of affective labour and the conditions under which this labour is performed (Elfer, 2012; Malhotra, 2022; Mikuska; Fairchild, 2020; PLA, 2018). It is therefore important to analyse what is felt and what may be expressed in the light of the interviewees' different responsibilities, without assuming a homogeneous professional experience.

This interpretation thus seeks to clarify both the emotional demands of pedagogical relationships with babies and young children and the organisational conditions that can make those relationships harder to sustain, without treating participants' accounts as homogeneous experiences.

Emotional containment: "I have to swallow what I feel"

Several educators reported having to contain their emotions every day, in situations of frustration, tiredness or sadness, to preserve a safe and welcoming environment for babies and young children. This containment requires constant emotional self-regulation, which is rarely acknowledged as an integral part of their work: "There are days when I feel like crying with them, but I can't. I have to stay calm, smile, be present. It's as though I disconnect from myself so I can be fully there for them." (Educator 2); "Even when I am emotionally exhausted, I have to be their safe haven [for the babies and young children]. It takes a toll. And nobody sees it" (Educator 5). These participants' words reveal the dual movement of containment: protecting

children's emotional security while simultaneously suspending or postponing the expression of their own tiredness and distress.

The expressions "disconnect from myself" (Educator 2) and "safe haven" (Educator 5) bring into focus the tension between professionals' emotional experiences and the affective availability they seek to ensure for children. In the light of Hochschild (1983), this distance between what is felt and what may be expressed approaches "emotional dissonance". Containment does not, however, imply a lack of involvement; in the situations described, educators seek to regulate their emotional expressions precisely to sustain the pedagogical relationship.

Emotional containment is also associated with the need to manage the expression of feelings in response to children's needs. One educator states: "However bad my mood is, I have to arrive with a smile from ear to ear and be there for them" (Educator 27). In another interview, regulation is explicitly described as a professional competency: "We need to know how to regulate our emotions and feelings in a balanced way, so that we can also be balanced adults" (Educator 7). These accounts illuminate the distance between the emotional state experienced by educators and the affective availability required in their everyday encounters with children, deepening the tension identified above.

The juxtaposition of the smile that is displayed (Educator 27) and the emotional balance that is sought (Educator 7) shows that regulation is not merely a response to tiredness: participants also recognise it as a professional competency. The same effort that enables a stable and welcoming presence may, when prolonged without support, contribute to exhaustion.

Emotional regulation also requires recognising that babies and young children are not passive recipients of care. One educator describes a situation in which a child initially resists contact during her first days at day care: "If she isn't accepting me, and we're on the first or second day of day care, I'll respect her decision. I won't impose my position" (Educator 8). In this account, containment means refraining from imposing adult intervention: the educator seeks to welcome the child's initiative, adjust her own behaviour and preserve the relationship. Attention to children's agency thus connects emotional regulation with pedagogical intentionality (Tomás; Schmitt, 2026).

In the experiences described, this exhaustion may extend beyond the individual level, affecting how educators perceive and feel about themselves professionally. The emotional dimension of pedagogical practice is thus intertwined with the construction of professional identity (Tadeu; Lopes, 2024).

Invisibility of affective labour: "It is not seen as work"

Although educators recognise the affective dimension as central to their pedagogical work, they feel that emotional labour is not regarded as "legitimate work" by managers, society or even some colleagues: "Being there, paying attention to the baby's gaze, the tone of their crying, their touch — that is work. But all that counts is whether I've filled in the forms or carried out 'visible' activities" (Educator 7); "Everyone talks about caring with affection, but nobody talks about the weight of being emotionally available, every single day, for ten babies" (Educator 24). In the first account, attentiveness to the baby's gaze and crying is contrasted with filling in forms; in the second, daily availability is presented as a demand that is rarely acknowledged. Both question what is recognised and valued as pedagogical work.

This difficulty of recognition may be reinforced by the naturalisation of care as an expression of a "feminine disposition". When attentiveness to others and affective availability are understood as personal qualities, it becomes harder to recognise them as demanding forms of professional knowledge that must be developed (Campbell-Barr, 2017; Malhotra, 2022; Mikuska; Fairchild, 2020).

Invisibility also emerges from the contrast between the work performed and what institutions and society can recognise. Referring to practice in day care settings, one participant observes: "Because there's very much that tendency, in day care and kindergarten, to show work that has been done, on paper" (Educator 3). Another educator remarks:

> I often say that working in day care is a little thankless because, in kindergarten, we display the children's work, they speak, they can already communicate, whereas in day care, a simple thank-you and their beginning to walk are things you can't put on a wall (Educator 23).

The relational dimension and the support given to children's achievements do not necessarily translate into products that can be displayed, although they are fundamental aspects of pedagogical practice. This difference helps explain why emotional labour continues to be described as largely invisible and insufficiently recognised.

It is in this gap, made tangible by accounts of forms, paper-based work and achievements that "you can't put on a wall" (Educator 23), that Mikuska and Fairchild's (2020) critique of the naturalisation of emotions is situated. Treating emotions as "natural", "individual" or "feminine" contributes to their disqualification as work, a form of symbolic violence that undermines the professional and material recognition of care.

The criticism voiced by Educators 3 and 23 does not devalue pedagogical records; rather, it questions their possible transformation into the principal criterion by which work becomes visible. The literature helps situate this tension between documentable outcomes and relational processes whose quality depends on attentiveness, continuity and pedagogical decisions that are not always immediately observable (Cameron; Moss, 2020; Taggart, 2016; Whitebook; McLean, 2017).

These accounts do not allow us to conclude that all institutions operate in the same way. They do, however, show how criteria of visibility, control and efficiency can subordinate the relational dimensions of work and professionals' well-being, an issue also problematised by Cameron and Moss (2020), Taggart (2016) and Whitebook and McLean (2017).

Emotional labour in ECEC is a form of knowledge, not an incidental gift (Malhotra, 2022; Mikuska; Fairchild, 2020; Taggart, 2016).

Exhaustion and silent resistance: "There is no room for weakness"

Prolonged emotional demands without recognition or space for regulation generate tiredness, frustration and, in some cases, silent suffering. Even so, educators remain present and resilient, seeking personal strategies for emotional survival: "I've thought about giving up many times. But then I look at them [the babies and young children] and find myself again. The trouble is that I take the weight home with me. Sometimes I don't even know whether I can put it down." (Educator 18). "They say we're strong. No, we're silent. We carry on because we have no other choice. Because we love it. But there are some very difficult days" (Educator 6). The "weight" carried home (Educator 18) and the phrase "we carry on" (Educator 6) show that sustained pedagogical presence can coexist with suffering and difficulties in finding support.

When Educator 6 contrasts the image of "strong" professionals with the experience of remaining "silent", resistance can no longer be understood merely as an individual virtue. Read alongside Aslanian (2018) and Taggart (2016), these accounts reveal both an ethical commitment to children and the limits of that commitment when emotional demands accumulate without recognition and support.

Exhaustion arises not only from emotionally demanding events in relationships with children, but also from the difficulty of meeting simultaneous professional responsibilities. One educator recalls: "I was already waking up not wanting to go to work. I wasn't coping" (Educator 24). Another, describing her intermittent presence in

the baby room, acknowledges: "I end up missing so many moments, and that's frustrating" (Educator 25). Concerns may also continue beyond the workplace: "I can't switch off and stop bringing things home" (Educator 30). Taken together, these accounts show that exhaustion may be linked both to the emotional availability required by relationships with children and to interruptions and overlapping responsibilities that make continuity in those relationships more difficult. Educator 25's frustration, in particular, concerns moments missed, not any lack of commitment to the children.

Educator 24's account of waking up without wanting to go to work, and Educator 30's statement that she cannot "switch off", point to distress persisting beyond isolated episodes. These accounts do not, in themselves, establish clinical consequences, but they resonate with research into the well-being and mental health of ECEC professionals (Corr et al., 2014; PLA, 2018).

The strategies of containment, self-regulation and resistance described by educators help sustain their pedagogical commitment to children and families. However, "carrying on" (Educator 6) and taking the "weight" home (Educator 18) do not mean that the conditions producing exhaustion have been resolved. The literature helps explain the cost of resistance experienced without sufficient opportunities for sharing and support within teams (Clark, 2019; Elfer, 2012; PLA, 2018; Taggart, 2016).

This is not simply about educating and caring well for children. It is also about caring for the professionals who do so — recognising that their bodies, voices and emotional presence are mobilised every day as fundamental and sophisticated pedagogical instruments.

Lack of institutional spaces for listening: "Nobody asks how we are"

A recurring criticism concerns the absence of organisational spaces that acknowledge and accommodate the emotional dimension of work. Educators report having nowhere to share what they feel and to be heard as professionals who experience emotions and are themselves affected: "Nobody has ever asked me how I feel about looking after ten babies every day. But they ask whether I've filled in the daily report" (Educator 1). The contrast between the daily report, which is checked, and the professional's emotional state, which nobody asks about, shows how different dimensions of work receive unequal attention.

The reference to the daily report situates the absence of listening within the ways work is monitored institutionally. Elfer (2012) and Taggart (2016) help explain why

spaces for reflection make it possible to process the affective tensions of practice collectively, rather than relegating them exclusively to the individual sphere.

The need for spaces for listening is not confined to educators who work directly with groups of children; it is also expressed by those who combine coordination or management responsibilities. Educator 24 states: "It's normal, we all need it, but nobody gives it to me. Who gives positive reinforcement to the boss? Nobody does" (Educator 24). The same participant describes interruptions to her presence in the room: "They were constantly calling me away, or the phone was ringing" (Educator 24). These accounts show that listening and recognition depend not only on individual availability, but also on how work is organised and on support among professionals.

The interruptions described by Educator 24 illustrate a difficulty that cannot be reduced to an individual's ability to manage emotions: the possibility of accompanying children and supporting teams also depends on the allocation of responsibilities and institutional time. Relational continuity and reflective supervision must therefore be considered together (Elfer, 2012; Taggart, 2016).

The lack of listening thus has an organisational dimension: emotional labour is demanded of professionals, yet it is not always recognised in how their work is supported and evaluated. The literature warns that this devaluation can reproduce gender inequalities and undermine the sustainability of the profession (Campbell-Barr, 2017; Mikuska; Fairchild, 2020; Taggart, 2016; Whitebook; McLean, 2017).

From the contrast between the records required of Educator 1 and the lack of recognition expressed by Educator 24 emerges a question that should become part of institutional cultures: "How are you? How do you feel in this place that asks so much of you?"

The neglect of the emotional dimension of work in day care settings cannot be addressed through individual strategies or occasional training alone. Institutional culture needs to be reconsidered to create emotionally sustainable workplaces with regular practices of listening, supervision and mutual support (Clark, 2019; Elfer, 2012; PLA, 2018; Taggart, 2016).

Promoting emotional well-being therefore requires listening to be more than an act of individual goodwill: it calls for protected time for mutual care, regular opportunities for sharing and leaders willing to recognise the affective demands of everyday practice (Clark, 2019; Elfer, 2012; PLA, 2018; Taggart, 2016).

At stake is not only the quality of the education and care offered to children — it is also the dignity of the professionals who make that quality possible.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article has sought to make visible a central yet systematically neglected dimension of early childhood educators' work in day care settings: emotional labour.

By listening to educators' voices and analysing their experiences, it has become clear that this labour is not peripheral — it is fundamental both to pedagogical relationships and to the construction of professional identities in ECEC (Tadeu; Lopes, 2024).

Educators share their bodies, voices and emotional presence with babies and young children who depend profoundly on their affective availability. They respond to crying, welcome frustration, contain their own anxiety and maintain a reassuring presence, even in working conditions marked by considerable exhaustion. And they often do so without institutional recognition, specific training or spaces in which to care for themselves (Aslanian, 2018; Clark, 2019; Elfer, 2012; Malhotra, 2022; Mikuska; Fairchild, 2020; PLA, 2018).

It is therefore not enough merely to acknowledge that emotional labour exists; action is needed. It must be integrated into initial and continuing education for early childhood educators, recognised as a legitimate part of professional practice, supported through organisational conditions and incorporated into critical reflection on models of quality and evaluation that continue to overlook it (Cameron; Moss, 2020; Malhotra, 2022; PLA, 2018; Taggart, 2016; Whitebook; McLean, 2017).

The article also makes several key recommendations. There is an urgent need to formally recognise emotional labour as a professional component of early childhood educators' work, with implications for public and educational policies, training, evaluation and professional development.

It is equally imperative to create regular institutional spaces for listening, supervision and emotional sharing, allowing the affective impact of everyday practice in day care settings to be acknowledged.

Reforming initial education programmes to include curricular units that connect relational ethics, the psychodynamics of care, emotional regulation and professionals' mental health is an important step (Elfer, 2012).

Likewise, educators' affective presence must be valued in material, practical and symbolic terms, challenging its naturalisation as a "feminine gift" and affirming it as a complex professional competency.

Caring for those who care is not a slogan — it is an ethical and political imperative. Only by providing that care can we ensure genuinely inclusive socio-educational settings for babies, young children, their families and those who welcome them every day with their whole hearts.

Caring for those who care is an urgent responsibility with a name and a face. It means restoring the body to care and the soul to pedagogy. For there can be no quality without educators who are whole. And the heart is not an optional extra; it is what sustains them.

The care that beats at the heart of day care is the very substance of the educational act. To ignore it is to dehumanise education in its earliest steps. To recognise it is to make room for a future in which caring relationships (Tadeu; Lopes, 2024) are not a luxury but a right — for those who care and those who receive care.

The findings of this study suggest that emotional labour should be reframed as a central professional competency in ECEC, particularly in day care settings. In practice, this implies that educational institutions need to develop emotionally sustainable workplaces, including regular opportunities for emotional supervision, listening practices and collective care strategies within teams.

From the perspective of public policy, the persistent devaluation of emotional labour calls for a structural response. Regulatory frameworks should formally recognise emotional competencies as fundamental components of pedagogical quality in ECEC, integrating them into training frameworks, human resources structures and quality evaluation criteria. This includes recognising affective labour as skilled work and ensuring that working conditions — including pay, working hours and support systems — reflect its complexity.

Further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of emotional labour on mental health, identity construction and educator retention. Comparative studies across different cultural and political contexts could help clarify how different systems sustain or undermine professionals' emotional well-being. Investigating effective models of emotional supervision and care-centred leadership could make valuable contributions to rethinking institutional cultures in ECEC.

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NOTES

TITLE OF THE WORK
"EVERYTHING I DO COMES FROM THE HEART": THE EMOTIONAL LABOUR OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN DAY CARE SETTINGS
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"Todo lo que hago pasa por el corazón": El trabajo emocional de las educadoras de la primera infancia en guarderías

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