

## Core practices that promote learning in *early childhood education*: A Multiple Case Study

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### Abstract

The objective of the study is to characterize core practices implemented by excellent early childhood educators in early childhood education classrooms. Through an exploratory and multiple case study, 18 video recordings of instructional activities carried out by the educators with children between 4 and 6 years of age were collected. The activities were analyzed using a mixed category system. Thirteen core practices that the educators implemented for the optimal development of the instructional process were identified, among which the following stand out: anticipating the task, posing and providing meanings, and making approximations to daily life. The total number of practices identified are characterized by preserving the comprehensiveness and complexity of the teaching process at the early childhood education. The characterization of these practices offers orientations for the improvement of educational practice, as well as guidelines to strengthen the initial and continuous training of educators.

**Keywords:** *Core Practices; early childhood education; teaching and learning; early childhood education teacher education.*

### Prácticas Fundamentales que Favorecen el Aprendizaje en Educación Parvularia: Un Estudio de Caso Múltiple

El objetivo del estudio es caracterizar prácticas fundamentales (CORE practices) implementadas por educadoras de párvulos de excelencia en aulas de educación infantil. Mediante un estudio exploratorio y de caso múltiple, se recopilaron 18 videgrabaciones de actividades instruccionales realizadas por las educadoras con niños entre 4 y 6 años. Las actividades se analizaron mediante un sistema de categorías mixto. Se identificaron 13 prácticas fundamentales que las educadoras implementaron para el óptimo desarrollo del proceso instruccional, se destacan: anticipar la tarea, plantear y proporcionar significados y realizar aproximaciones a la vida diaria. El total de prácticas identificadas se caracterizan por preservar la integralidad y complejidad del proceso de enseñanza en el nivel de educación parvularia. La caracterización de dichas prácticas ofrece orientaciones para la mejora de la práctica educativa, también, directrices que permiten fortalecer la formación inicial y continua de las educadoras.

**Palabras clave:** Core Practices; educación infantil; enseñanza y aprendizaje; formación maestros de educación infantil.

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, studies on Early Childhood Education have increased and the positive impact of this level on the subsequent development of learners has been highlighted (Chesworth, 2018; Farley, Brock, & Winterbottom, 2018; López et al., 2021; Sanders & Farago, 2018; Pianta et al., 2016). Although there are several factors involved in achieving optimal learning, the interactions established in the pedagogical practice are a determining factor (Barrientos-Fernández et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2018; Veraksa et al., 2016) along with the professional competencies of those who exercise it (Adlerstein and Pardo, 2020; DiCarlo et al., 2020).

Despite the advances presented in early childhood education, both in Chile (Adlerstein and Pardo, 2020) and in Latin America, there are still relevant challenges to strengthen pedagogical practices to generate quality learning in children (the generic term "children" will be used to refer to both "boys" and "girls") attending early childhood education (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2016; López et al., 2021).

Recent research has alerted about weaknesses in the initial and continuous training of educators working in early childhood education (Adlerstein and Pardo, 2020), some of these weaknesses are related to the low pedagogical support offered to learners in the instructional processes (Pianta et al., 2016), and the scarce opportunities that children have to receive feedback that promotes the development of their cognitive skills (Muñoz and Santa Cruz, 2016). Following the above, it is projected as a development horizon to safeguard the improvement of pedagogical practices in educators with the aim of promoting quality interactions, that is, that are warm, dialogic, receptive to children's interests and sensitive to their needs (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2016). Thus, it is necessary to advance in the promulgation of orientations and guidelines that promote quality educational experiences, as well as to train in-service and in-training professionals on what and how to teach in order to enhance the skills of early childhood education (Adlerstein and Pardo, 2020; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2016).

This study aimed to identify and characterize core practices that promote learning in early childhood education, that is, those practices that compose and distinguish a particular profession, which emerge, are implemented and inform the learning process that is built between educators and learners.

### **Core practices and learning to practice a profession**

This study is ascribed to the teacher training proposal put forward by Grossman (2018) and aims to move towards the construction of a framework of reference that allows understanding fundamental pedagogical practices oriented to learning at the early childhood education. The literature reveals that *Core Practices* or fundamental practices (also called central practices) make it possible to analyze and describe the practice of a profession for the subsequent teaching of those fundamental components of the practice of that profession, a subject that can be included in education programs, during and prior to the end of professional training (Clarà, 2019; Grossman, Hammerness and McDonald, 2009).

Core practices have been used in different training programs in disciplines interested in identifying, understanding and characterizing distinctive core practices of the disciplines. In the case of educational sciences, the pioneering framework is *Teaching Works* (Grossman et al., 2009), defined as a set of skills, routines and movements (actions) that teachers perform to support learning in the classroom, which can be broken down and learned by teachers in training. *Teaching Work* is supported by research conducted in primary education and in different sociocultural contexts, its foundation is to support the teaching process, for which it promotes the cognitive, social and emotional development of students (See in detail: <http://www.teachingworks.org/about/history>).

Recent educational research has focused on identifying core practices that inform and help shape teacher training. Also professional development in the teaching of history (Fogo, 2014), music (Millican and Forrester, 2018), and science (Kloser, 2014). Regarding early childhood education, Hedges and Cooper (2018) conducted the first study referring to core practices in which, through a theoretically informed review, they propose a new conceptualization of teaching to highlight the need to position play, as a key principle in the teaching and learning process within participatory and relational pedagogies as a fundamental practice of early childhood education.

The core practices seek an articulation between school and faculty, according to Clarà (2019) the university-school articulation is understood as a *continuum* that allows progressing from simulated practice environments to increasingly authentic practice environments (Grossman et al., 2009), so that the repertoire of identified practices can be actively built and vary in their specificity or completeness. Then, foundational practices can be put into action in any curriculum or teaching approach, it allows teachers to learn more from their students and about their teaching actions, preserving the integrity and complexity of the teaching and learning process (Grossman, 2018; Hedges and Cooper, 2018). However, the identification of core practices is problematic and challenging (Clarà, 2019), but they can be observed and defined in practice with the teachers themselves.

## Studies on pedagogical practices focused on learning in early childhood education

The literature reports various theoretical frameworks for evaluating and interpreting pedagogical practice. Regarding measurements that evaluate the quality of practice in early childhood education, there is evidence of different observation measures (Barrientos-Fernández et al., 2020; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2016); however, the most widely used nationally and internationally has been the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta et al., 2016). The CLASS model provides an observation instrument focused on the effectiveness of interactions between educator and children (infants up to 8 years old) that foster social, emotional and cognitive development, it is organized into 10 dimensions of interactions, which are categorized into three domains that have a broad theoretical and empirical support: emotional support, classroom organization and instructional support (Pianta et al., 2016). So far, the most studied domains are emotional support and classroom organization (Barrientos-Fernández et al., 2020).

Within the framework of the analysis of pedagogical practices are two benchmark models validated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): the first, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, DAP (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Sanders & Farago, 2018) and the second, *Evidence-Based Practices*, EBP (Buysse, Wesley, Snyder, & Winton, 2006; Farley et al., 2018).

The premise of the DAP model is that teaching in early childhood education should adhere to domains and goals of evolutionary development as defined by developmental psychology, along with the integration of children's social and cultural context (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The model is dominated by the notion that child development should promote high-quality early learning for all children (Bredekamp, 2017). The DAP model proposes nine principles that have implications for the professional practice of early childhood education, which are oriented to provide each child with high expectations in the face of challenges, grant adequate support to the needs that children present, be sensitive to their needs, and offer ample opportunities for stimulation. On the other hand, it is emphasized that the educator must use knowledge of child development to favor learning in context. Some examples of DAP are: encouraging dialogue and communication in interaction and listening carefully to find meaning in what a child says (Sanders and Farago, 2018).

The EBP model is based on studies that demonstrate causal connections between the given practice and student outcomes. The model reports practices that have been replicated in different contexts and have led to similar outcomes (Buysse et al., 2006; Egan and Pope, 2019; Farley et al., 2018). In addition, they propose a number of strategies or interventions that have demonstrated a statistically significant effect on improving student outcomes (Farley et al., 2018). One example of practice promoted by the model relates to actions that explicitly develop phonological awareness, as it is directly related to children's success in reading and writing (Egan and Pope, 2019).

Beyond the distinctiveness of each proposal, and the broad vision of the teaching and learning process, Farley et al. (2018) point out that the models can be implemented in different contexts considering variables of the family and cultural context, which configure the framework in which children develop and in which their development takes place. However, DAPs have been questioned because they do not address the diverse learning needs and interests of children, rather a uniformity tends to prevail in the classroom (Sanders and Farago, 2018), since all children should have the same experiences to achieve a certain type of learning. PBS, on the other hand, requires a consensus on the results that allow distinguishing and attributing to a practice a significant impact on learning outcomes, in addition to the fact that its implementation requires monitoring (Farley et al., 2018). On the other hand, although the DAP and EBP address areas of the early childhood education curriculum associated with variables of the macro sociocultural context and those of the family microsystem, it is noted that the models are weak in terms of systematization, prioritization and classification of those fundamental pedagogical practices that best represent the actions of the professional for the promotion and achievement of learning and curricular goals, together with the child development.

In summary, *Core Practices*, EBP and DAP provide a frame of reference that contribute to have more precise definitions regarding practices for early childhood education, and it would be expected that they would be informed and the object of learning from initial training. Assuming the need to concretize and contextualize the international frameworks, this study contributes with a local and expanded version of *Teaching Works* (Grossman et al., 2009), obtained from the identification and description of core practices that refer to the early childhood education, with the expectation that they can contribute and be considered in the learning objectives and subjects from the initial training.

## METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative (Creswell, 2014), based on the interpretive paradigm, exploratory in orientation and corresponds to a multiple case study (Stake, 2010), in which the same phenomenon is studied in different instances, since it is of interest to answer questions about "how" and "in what way" the phenomenon of interest occurs. Thus, the study investigates the pedagogical practices of three early childhood education teacher education while they were working in their respective classroom contexts.

### Participants

The participants, who work in municipal schools of public institutions, were selected through a purposive sample (Creswell, 2014), based on the fulfillment of three criteria associated with professional performance: having at least five years of professional experience, having achieved the qualification of expert in their last teacher evaluation (Teacher Professional Performance Evaluation System, mandatory for teachers who work in schools that depend on municipalities or Local Education Services, see more <https://www.cpeip.cl/evaluacion-docente/>) and finally, having a mentoring diploma given by the university sponsoring the study. After an invitation to those who met the criteria, in one commune of the Valparaíso Region, Chile, three educators agreed to participate. Each participant's classroom consisted of an average of 35 children and two adults (the educator and an assistant) and pedagogical practices were implemented within the framework of the integral method, which is based on the continuous improvement of the pedagogical processes of the learners.

### Data collection and analysis procedure

Data were collected in the natural context of the instructional activities: the classroom. These activities were both the focus of inquiry and the unit of analysis, delimiting them on the basis of their teaching and learning purpose oriented to an area of early childhood education learning; for example, language and communication development activities, logical relationships and mathematical thinking, among others.

In all three cases, the process included the recording of activities through video recordings and field notes, based on natural and non-participatory observations (Stake, 2010). The ethical dimension of the research was safeguarded, so that each educator participated voluntarily, leaving it in writing in a consent form and, in addition, the consent of the parents and guardians of the children present in the filmed classrooms was obtained.

The audiovisual recordings were made for a series of didactic units planned in an academic semester, in order to collect the reiteration of pedagogical practices and ensure systematicity in data collection (Erickson, 2006). In the recording sessions, with each educator, a specific instructional activity was selected. A total of 12 hours corresponding to 18 instructional activities were recorded, seven of them corresponding to case A, five to case B and six to case C. The number of students per classroom ranged from 30 to 35, with ages ranging from 4 to 6 years old. The duration of each instructional activity was approximately 40 minutes.

The data were analyzed using a simplified version of the interactivity analysis model (Coll, Mauri and Onrubia, 2008), which made it possible to identify the predominant actions carried out by the educators in the instructional activity, based on semiotic resources and verbal and nonverbal interactions between educator and student, or between students. This process was supported by the Atlas.ti software, version 8. Subsequently, a deductive analysis was performed based on three codings: the first, mixed coding, used *Teaching Works* (Grossman et al., 2009) as a reference. This made it possible to identify the actions that the educators implemented in relation to the social organization and resources to support the teaching and learning process of the learners in the instructional activity. Next, taking *Strauss and Corbin's* (1998) recommendations, an open coding and an analytical coding were carried out. Open coding helped to identify and analyze each instructional activity recorded in each case, taking *Teaching Works* as a reference, as well as a set of emerging practices. This allowed the subsequent characterization of the core practices found in early childhood education. Analytical coding facilitated the description of each practice identified in each instructional activity, thanks to a process of analysis, interpretation and theoretical contrast. Finally, a triangulation process was implemented to safeguard the validity of the analyses, and considering the proposal of *Strauss and Corbin* (1998), the verification of the codifications was carried out by contrasting them with the specialized literature and with the observations of the instructional activities, with the direct

intervention of the researchers of the team, thus ensuring the saturation of the data for the definition of the core practices identified.

## RESULTS

The results are organized into three cores. First, the set of core practices identified in the 18 instructional activities is presented; second, the core practices identified on a case-by-case basis are presented; and third, a conceptual elaboration of the so-called emergent core practices that emerged from the case studies and are not contained in the *Teaching Works* framework is presented (Grossman et al., 2009).

### The set of core practices

In the 18 instructional activities, 13 core practices representative of early childhood education (in the 4- and 6-year-old range) were identified, which are described and characterized in Table 1. The first 10 coincide with the core practices proposed in *Teaching Works*, but correspond to an adjusted and representative version of the level. The description presented here shows how the educator promotes learning in the students, and also reveals the multiple uses given to didactic objects to promote learning at this educational level. The three remaining practices correspond to practices identified from the data, which are therefore a finding of the research and have been considered as emerging practices oriented to learning and specific to the level.

**Table 1:**Core practices identified in early childhood education

N	Core practices	Description of the core practice for early childhood education
1	Leading a group discussion	The educator directs and guides the sharing of opinions, ideas and examples that both she and the learners share and discuss publicly on a specific topic. The educator uses the children's contributions to work on the learning content, allowing them to practice active listening, public speaking, interpreting, valuing and learning from the contributions of others.
2	Explain and model content, practices and strategies.	The educator gives instructions of the task or actions to be performed by the children from a variety of discursive orientations and strategies (verbal and nonverbal). In addition, she models procedures to facilitate their understanding of the instruction and the performance to be executed.
3	Eliciting and interpreting learner thinking	The educator accesses the thoughts and ideas of the learners on certain topics or learning contents in order to evaluate their understanding. The educator, by means of different strategies such as verbal language, gestural expression, production of texts or drawings, use of graphic media or other material, favors the elaboration of ideas and representations for their consequent manifestation, expression and communication.
4	Implement rules and routines related to disciplinary knowledge.	The educator shares and builds knowledge about norms and routines that reflect learning a discipline with learners. She uses multiple strategies linked to teaching the discipline such as hypothesizing, presenting assertions, and demonstrating one's thinking in detail.
5	Implement organizational routine	The educator defines the usual coordinates in which the instructional activity is developed, determining not only the learning objective, but also the time of dedication, the space, the materials and the rules of participation, in order to implement the activity in an organized manner and to acquire or produce a certain instructional routine. The tasks are implemented under certain constancy that contemplate the time of duration and the forms of participation.
6	Coordinating and adjusting instruction during an instructional activity	The educator coordinates and adjusts instruction in order to maintain coherence between what is planned and what is implemented in the classroom. She ensures that the instructional activity responds to the needs of the learners by explicitly connecting the moments of the class, managing the transition from one activity to another, making changes in the way she is carrying out what is planned in order to respond to the progress of the learners.
7	Specifying and reinforcing the productive behavior of learners	The educator takes actions that promote a classroom climate that is responsive, industrious and conducive to learning, recognizing and respecting the multiple ways in which learners act when they are engaged in their learning and task-oriented.  The educator emphasizes and gives positive verbal reinforcement or bodily



		and/or graphic demonstrations that inform learners of their individual or collective performance.
8	Establishing and managing small group work	The educator defines and implements work to be developed in small groups to encourage collaborative work, or to address complex content more efficiently. The work is carried out under clear and concrete instructions, allowing the groups to develop the tasks in a semi-independent way. The educator implements follow-up strategies, allowing her to know the progress of the tasks.
9	Test learners' understanding during and at the end of instructional experiences.	The educator explores and verifies the learners' learning during and at the end of the instructional experiences, using strategies to access and assess understanding of behaviors, topics and learning content. She implements tasks of brief execution, considers the help or contributions of the learners towards their peers and resorts to questions, requests demonstrations, examples and paraphrases the interventions of the learners.
10	Provide oral and/or graphic feedback	The educator develops and provides feedback to learners that is focused on the characteristics of their tasks and the performance achieved in them or another activity, communicating the information (either orally or graphically) and seeking their understanding of it. In this way, it allows learners to focus on their achievements and areas for improvement, informing them how to do so.
11	Anticipate the task	The educator uses a set of strategies to capture the learners' attention and signal the upcoming task to be performed. As a transition to the new task, the educator introduces background information that makes it easier for the children to recall or connect with previous information about the action to be performed. In addition, she indicates the procedures to carry it out, shows or verbalizes the resources to be used, encouraging and motivating the learners.
12	Raising and providing meanings to modify prior knowledge	The educator verbally raises concepts and ideas in order to connect the learners' initial representation of the subject matter with more elaborated and academically predetermined meanings. To help expand, clarify or modify the initial representations, the educator asks direct and indirect questions, provides clues, problematizes everyday situations, reminds and synthesizes key concepts, elaborates comments and interventions that students make in the activity to monitor and guide the modification of meanings.
13	Approach to daily life	The educator makes explicit the connection between the learning content or behavior and its usefulness in everyday life, through verbal discursive actions or simulated performances. Thus, the educator gives a practical and everyday sense to certain learning objectives, through dialogue, exemplification or illustration, representation of scenes, use of pictorial materials, graphic organizers and the use of software.

### Core case-by-case practices

The second core result is presented in Table 2 and reports the organization and frequency of the core practices identified in the 18 instructional activities corresponding to the three cases. The results show that in Cases A and B, 10 core practices were identified, while in Case C there were 11.

**Table 2:** Key practices identified in each case study

Core practices	Case A	Case B	Case C	Total
Leading a group discussion	0	1	1	2
Explain and model content, practices and strategies.	2	13	5	20
eliciting and interpreting individual learner thinking	9	5	11	25
Implement rules and routines related to disciplinary knowledge.	6	1	7	14
Implement organizational routine	11	21	9	41

Coordinating and adjusting instruction during an instructional activity	0	0	2	2
Specifying and reinforcing productive student behavior	2	3	8	13
Establishing and managing small group work	1	2	4	7
Check students' understanding during and at the end of instructional experiences.	8	7	12	27
Provide oral and/or graphic feedback to students.	0	0	3	3
Anticipate the task	15	8	14	37
Raising and providing meanings to modify prior knowledge	1	2	0	3
Approach to daily life	1	0	0	1

The core practices that emerged less frequently were: Leading a group discussion, Coordinating and adjusting teaching, and providing oral or graphic feedback, corresponding to *Teaching Works*, and Approximation to daily life, corresponding to the emerging practices of the study. The low frequency of these practices is interpreted, on the one hand, from the design and characteristics of the instructional activities analyzed, since their objective was to present and develop concepts referred, in some cases, to mathematical logical reasoning and, in others, to language syntax. Thus, children were restricted in their opportunities to relate and expose opinions, stories and experiences. In addition, sometimes the planning of the session was not presented, making it more complex to determine the degree of adjustment introduced by the educators to the teaching and learning process.

Despite the low frequency of such practices, their implementation in early childhood education has had a positive impact as reported by other research, Chesworth (2018) points out that group discussion offers important perspectives of shared participation between children and teachers to respond to their interests and expand them. In addition, it favors the quality of their interactions, an area that has been very much downgraded in studies conducted in early childhood education, but fundamental to develop quality learning (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2016).

Regarding the practice Coordinate and adjust teaching during class, evidence indicates that adjusting teaching to the characteristics of learners can be related to academic improvements both at the educational level in question and at subsequent levels (Muñoz and Santa Cruz, 2016). In addition, it allows teachers and learners to progressively build richer and more complex shared meaning systems, jointly developed throughout instructional activities (Coll et al., 2008).

Finally, regarding providing feedback to learners, the results of Muñoz and Santa Cruz (2016) indicate that there are statistically significant differences in metacognitive control between learners who receive oral *feedback from the* educator during the instructional activity and those who do not. *Feedback* that modifies learners' metacognitive control should be timely, specific and enable task performance.

### Theoretical elaboration of emerging core practices

A theoretical elaboration of the identified emerging core practices is proposed and their relevance in the framework of early childhood education is argued.

#### *Why is it relevant to anticipate homework for early childhood learners?*

Informing in advance the task or the series of actions foreseen in an imminent learning activity, in which the learners must commit and participate, entails a series of benefits both for the children and for the joint activity that learners and educator build, in general.

Anticipating the task, together with calling and preparing the attention of the learners, would involve awakening interest in the task, and raising the levels of involvement on the part of the children. In this sense, the work of anticipating the task represents a strategy that favors children's willingness to learn (DiCarlo, et

al., 2020). As proposed by Bruner (1969), in instruction it is essential to be interested in and incorporate the experiences and contexts of the learner, in order to contribute to their motivation and desire to learn, so that they themselves are cognitively disposed to discover and relate knowledge. Therefore, including and preparing actions as a prelude to the task offers the opportunity to think about the situation to be faced and, together with this, to manage the interest and motivation for it.

In terms of cognitive processes, planning requires the ability to project into the future and involves scheduling the succession of tasks involved in achieving a goal. Therefore, by presenting tasks in advance, it is easier for children to face them in a planned manner, promoting an executive function of cognitive processes (Van Lier and Deater-Deckard, 2016). In this regard, recent research has shown that making explicit to children what is expected of them favors both task planning, attention and the relationships they establish between their previous knowledge and the new task, since they analyze what they must perform in order to be able to use what they already know to learn and understand the next step (DiCarlo, et al., 2020; Sanders and Farago, 2018).

In early childhood education, the explanation of the route of educational activities is important for the fulfillment of the learning objective, since children tend to show a more restless behavior or less interest when they do not know the background of what they have to do. Therefore, they need to know the steps to understand it and continue with the proposed challenge independently (Bredekamp, 2017) and thus increase the attention and commitment of the group in the activity (DiCarlo, et al., 2020).

*Why is it relevant to raise and provide meanings to modify learners' prior knowledge?*

Verbally expressing concepts or ideas so that the learners connect the initial representation they have about these concepts helps to modify or expand the initial representations. The educator's action, together with favoring the development of language and its verbal expression, allows, on the one hand, a collective and common construction of a certain piece of knowledge, which is crucial for the learning progress and development of learners, since they will be sharing these new meanings in the school and social context in which they participate (Coll et al., 2008).

On the other hand, the fact that the educator provides new meanings to modify previous knowledge, based on strategies such as clues, problems of daily life, reelaboration of contents, allows a scaffolding for learning that helps learners to appropriate cultural concepts, incorporating them in their daily activities. Through her actions, the educator favors symbolic combinations, which allow learners to elaborate more complex meanings, reflecting the presence of the symbolic function at the level of materialized actions that the learner can perform individually in combination with the symbolic actions that can be performed with the help of the adult (Vygotsky, 1995).

Likewise, the relevance of proposing and providing meanings to modify learners' prior knowledge highlights the role of the adult in the activity, in terms of the strategies used to scaffold the meanings that are shared and the possibilities offered for learners to use them in different contexts. Research indicates that the tasks proposed to learners should be meaningful and related to their age (Muñoz and Santa Cruz, 2016), in order to activate children's attentional processes (DiCarlo, et al., 2020), allowing them to be able to solve problematic or controversial tasks, in which they use new concepts or knowledge by presenting certain arguments (Veraksa et al., 2016).

In short, posing and providing meanings to construct new parcels of knowledge favors situated learning, since it allows children to use the new knowledge in the social contexts in which they develop, in addition to achieving a superior mastery of knowledge compared to the current one, favoring opportunities to practice newly acquired skills.

*Why is it relevant to bring learning closer to children's daily life in early childhood education?*

Making explicit to the learners the connections between the contents and/or behaviors worked on and their usefulness in everyday life favors the expression of learning interests by the learners, since in the short or medium term they will be able to link them and dispose of them in the social context that surrounds them. As Chatsworth (2018) points out, it is paramount that the educator carries out strategies that allow making sense of the abstract content to be addressed in a practical way, in addition, supporting and responding to the needs of the children who are present in the activity (DiCarlo, et al., 2020).

From the ecology of learning, the connections that are aligned between the home and the educational institution provide support to children's lives, fostering the development and recovery of everyday concepts,



which were learned during participation in common experiences in families and communities, thus recognizing the value of culture and early social experiences in learning. Following Vygotsky (1995), school instruction is a direct experience of mediated learning, in which correct teaching that reflects cultural value is the greatest contribution to the development of learners.

According to Hedges and Copper (2018), in early childhood education teachers proactively and spontaneously deepen children's thinking and understanding in relation to their own interests and motivations during reflective pedagogical interactions arising from play, which has been theorized as a core practice in which children can extract everyday concepts and transform them into scientific or academic concepts, where their learning involves an important qualitative leap in development. This is because the construction of concepts is a complex process that involves the evolution of higher psychological functions such as deliberate attention, logical memory, abstraction and the ability to compare and differentiate.

Finally, the relevance of bringing learning closer to the daily lives of learners is linked to a pedagogical approach based on shared participation between children and teachers, in which their interests are addressed with the aim of broadening them (Chesworth, 2018) and in which the new is sought to be linked to the familiar.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the three cases report 13 core practices that took place in different curricular areas of early childhood education, which were implemented by educators whose pedagogical work was rated as excellent. Although the identification of the practices was initially based on the *Teaching Works* framework (Grossman et al., 2009), the first 10 correspond to an adapted version of these practices and reflect the particularities of the early childhood education level. On the other hand, the remaining three are representative practices of the cases studied, and considered as research findings. Based on the above, four central aspects are discussed.

First, the 13 practices characterized are a contribution to early childhood education as they may represent a reference to be considered for both initial and continuous training of professionals at this level, contributing to the challenge of achieving significant and systematic improvements in the learning that takes place in the instructional activity with children between 4 and 6 years of age (Pianta et al., 2016). In addition, and in line with what was pointed out with the findings of Hedges and Copper (2018), the identification and characterization of core practices of the profession allows differentiating teachers' performances and understanding their internal relationships for the benefit of the learning process. In such a way, the set of the 13 practices are a repertoire of practices plausibly transferable to different educational contexts, since they are implemented from the professional judgment regarding how and when to use them in the instructional process (Grossman, 2018).

In another line of discussion, the variety of core practices identified in the instructional activities allows highlighting the particularity of this proposal and its value for early childhood education, since in the characterization of the practices presented, the actions and movements carried out by the educators during the instructional process are made explicit, being these an important determinant of the quality of the learning processes. The above is consistent with the studies of Adlerstein and Pardo (2020) and Locasale-Crouch et al., (2016) who point out that the ways in which professionals materialize and implement teaching and the way they mediate the interactions they establish with learners during instructional activities are an essential pillar for their development and learning. In addition, the results of the study add to the conclusions of Barrientos-Fernández et al (2020) since it offers reference information that allows educators to manage the instructional activity adequately. Associated with the above, the identified practices contribute to the professional work at the educational level, since - as concluded by López et al (2021) - teachers use few pedagogical modalities to favor representation, expression and motivation for learning. Therefore, the identified practices could be considered as drivers of the development of students' learning.

Third, the results presented are a contribution to studies focused on practices that seek to improve instruction (Buyse et al., 2006; DiCarlo et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2018; Pianta et al., 2016;), and those interested in informing teacher practice (Egan and Pope, 2019), since foundational practices in their nature seek to preserve the integrity and complexity of the teaching process in the classroom, along with promoting situated learning, which according to the studies of Chesworth (2018) and Hedges and Copper (2018) is seen in the consideration and integration of the context and relationships of learners with their culture. This last idea is linked to bringing learning closer to children's daily lives in which connections are sought between what happens in the classroom and what is presented in the sociocultural context (Chesworth, 2018), i.e.,

personal information associated with the social and cultural context in which they develop (DiCarlo et al., 2020; Egan and Pope, 2019). The above is consistent with what is proposed in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECE), it is necessary that the learning outcomes of the early years are built on learning that favors development and is linked to their environment.

Fourth, the characterization of the core practices informs the importance of promoting learners' cognitive processes, but without neglecting their social and emotional processes. Thus, the practices presented here assume an approach to the children's interests, concerns and motivations and make use of them for the instructional experiences. In this sense, the teacher's pedagogical actions would be considering the children's willingness to learn, which is manifested in their curiosity, attention, inclination and eagerness to discover and experiment (Bruner, 1969). This connects solidly with the Piagetian principle of learning by discovery, which can be pedagogically promoted by stimulating the self-regulatory activity of investigation, exploration and interaction with the world and coordination with others (Sanders and Farago, 2018).

And finally, the findings presented are a concrete contribution to the initial training of Early childhood teachers', since the core practices presented allow teacher trainers to know them and approach them from the initial training in order to link them and, as Clarà's study (2019) points out, to make an articulation between university-school contexts, aimed at building a repertoire of situational knowledge. In addition, the professional development of educators is favored (Farley et al., 2018), which is essential to impact the quality of the pedagogical work carried out in the classroom, so it is necessary to have references associated with core pedagogical practices that best represent the professional performance in the instructional process, which promote quality learning and enable, as expressed by Fogo (2014) and Millican and Forrester (2018), a framework that allows early childhood education professionals to have a common language within the profession.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study characterizes 13 core practices identified in the instructional activity, these are oriented to the learning of children attending early childhood education in municipal schools of public institutions and took place in different curricular areas of this educational level. In the characterization of these practices, the aspects of the level are considered, regarding the multiple uses of didactic objects to favor learning, and the strategies that accompany the action of the educator in the instructional process. In sum, it is concluded that, on the one hand, the practices characterized can be used and incorporated in any instructional process carried out with children between 4 and 6 years of age, regardless of the curricular modality used in the classroom. On the other hand, the practices presented are a contribution to the initial and continuous training of educators working in early childhood education, since they allow from the initial training to advance towards the construction of a frame of reference, which acts as a common language among teachers, so that they appropriate these practices and can favor the articulation between university-school, for a quality teaching in the early childhood education classroom. Finally, the proposed practices broaden the view of the national curricular references proposed for the pedagogical work of the educators since they materialize the actions that the educators carry out for the teaching and learning of all the children of the level, as well as they gather the proposal of international frameworks such as Early Childhood Education and Care (ECE) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) since they guide the pedagogical actions that the teachers carry out in order to assure the quality of the instructional process. Finally, it should be noted that the core practices are not limited only to the activities of the instructional process, given that the work of a teacher involves different performances, so it would be interesting to continue researching other aspects of professional practice, such as work with the family and in the community, as well as in professional development.

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