

**THE LISTENING CIRCLES DEVICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION  
WORK**

***O DISPOSITIVO DAS RODAS DE ESCUTA NO TRABALHO DE EDUCAÇÃO  
INFANTIL***

***EL DISPOSITIVO DE LOS CÍRCULOS DE ESCUCHA EN EL TRABAJO DE  
EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL***



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**ABSTRACT:** Educators play a significant role in the constitution of subjectivity and child development. However, the literature points to the lack of attention given to these professionals when considering the relevance of their role in the care and education of children. Therefore, the present article aims to discuss the device of listening circles in practice with preschool educators from a research-extension project. As a methodology, a narrative literature review was assumed, which allowed the discussion about the crossovers of work between early childhood education. The listening wheels sustained by psychoanalysis constituted a powerful device for the circulation of the word and for the emergence of relations of alterity.

**KEYWORDS:** Listening circles. Educators. Clinical tools.

**RESUMO:** *As educadoras desempenham um papel significativo na constituição da subjetividade e no desenvolvimento infantil. Contudo, a literatura aponta a carência da atenção voltada a essas profissionais ao considerar a relevância do seu papel no cuidado e educação de crianças. Por isso, o presente artigo tem como objetivo debater o dispositivo de rodas de escuta na prática com educadoras de uma escola de educação infantil a partir de um projeto de pesquisa-extensão. Como metodologia assumiu-se uma revisão narrativa de literatura que permitiu a discussão a respeito dos atravessamentos do trabalho com a educação infantil. As rodas de escuta sustentadas pela psicanálise, constituíram-se como um dispositivo potente de circulação da palavra e para a emergência de relações de alteridade.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Rodas de escuta. Educadoras. Dispositivos Clínicos.

**RESUMEN:** *Las educadoras desempeñan un papel significativo en la constitución de la subjetividad y el desarrollo infantil. Sin embargo, la literatura señala la falta de atención que se les da a estas profesionales al considerar la relevancia de su papel en el cuidado y la educación de los niños. Por ello, el presente artículo tiene como objetivo debatir el dispositivo de ruedas de escucha en la práctica con educadoras de una escuela de educación infantil a partir de un proyecto de investigación-extensión. Como metodología se asumió una revisión narrativa de la literatura que permitió la discusión sobre los cruces del trabajo con la educación infantil. Las ruedas de escucha sostenidas por el psicoanálisis se constituyeron como un dispositivo potente para la circulación de la palabra y para la emergencia de relaciones de alteridad.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Ruedas de escucha. Educadoras. Dispositivos Clínicos.

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## Introduction

The present article aims to discuss the use of listening circles in practice with educators<sup>4</sup> at preschools. This writing emerges from the experience of the first author in an extension project titled “*Acompanhamento a educadoras de berçário - atuando na interface entre saúde mental e educação*”<sup>5</sup>, which is also part of her master's journey. The project was developed by the Center for Studies in Psychoanalysis and Childhood (NEPIs) at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) and aims to reflect on the intertwining of daily classroom life and the mental health of babies and educators in the context of preschool education. Throughout the year 2023, in partnership with a school<sup>6</sup> affiliated with the municipality of Porto Alegre, weekly follow-ups were conducted with babies aged 4 to 24 months and their educators. Additionally, monthly listening circles were held with early childhood education professionals from the same institution, led by the first author of this article and another master's student.

Based on this experience, several questions arose regarding the implications of working with children. Among them, the questioning of the teacher's knowledge contributes to the naturalization of outsourcing care, as well as the role that the school plays in the community, sometimes resulting in misunderstandings regarding the expected role of education between families and the school institution. These inquiries led to reflections on the role of psychoanalysis in addressing the educators' complaints and the complexity of establishing boundaries for their work with children and their families.

The experience of listening to educators led to questions that prompted the development of this article as a way to reflect on the methodology used in the meetings: listening circles. We draw on the conceptualization of Moura and Giannella (2016) for the term, defining it as an effective device for the practice of attentive listening. The interest lies in considering the particularities of work in the educational environment and how opportunities for dialogue occur.

The recognition of the power of this act is grounded in psychoanalytic theory, with an ethical implication that emphasizes listening to the subject (Dunker; Thebas; 2021). Thus, it

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<sup>4</sup> For this writing, we will use the term "educators" to refer to professionals dedicated to the care and education of children within early childhood education. This choice was made due to the exclusive participation of women in the Listening Circles, as it was conducted in a school where only women worked as education professionals.

<sup>5</sup> Support for nursery educators - acting at the interface between mental health and education.

<sup>6</sup> The extension project took place in a school located in a peripheral region of Porto Alegre, bordering another municipality in the metropolitan area. Students are referred through the Municipal Education Secretariat (SMED), as the institution is part of the municipality's partnered network. Most enrolled children reside in the community where the school is located, a situation shared by some educators.

was recognized as important to create a space that allowed for the free association of educators, where they could also engage in collective sharing. It was in this process that listening circles emerged as a device capable of being integrated into the school context while being anchored in a psychoanalytic listening approach. Throughout the article, the theoretical construction of this space is outlined, and some of the questions arising from this experience are discussed.

To this end, an initial journey will be undertaken regarding the specificities of early childhood education in the Brazilian context. This overview allows for a deeper exploration of the production of teacher distress within this framework. In other words, there are particularities in the experiences of educators working in this scope of practice that complicate relationships and impact mental health. Particularly considering the intersection between the roles of educating and caring, this prompts a reflection on the peculiarities that underpin this work, namely, a constant state of transition between these two positions.

Continuing the discourse, there is a narrative of seeking to listen to the ways in which the accompanied educators operate amidst this complexity. Furthermore, the listening circles are presented for their potential to create openings so that, through the sharing of speech, alternative ways to address distress can emerge.

### **Regarding work in early childhood education**

The origin of work in early childhood education in Brazil emerged from the expressive traces of coloniality in childcare, highlighting how society viewed children through socioeconomic and racial lenses (Guimarães, 2017). According to the author, while white children were seen as an investment in upbringing and care, poor and black children were subjected to exploitation similar to enslaved adults, resulting in the absence of educational opportunities for them.

Initially driven by hygiene and welfare concerns, early childhood education began to be recognized as a right for children following the Federal Constitution of 1988. Alongside the establishment of the Child and Adolescent Statute, early childhood education was regulated to ensure access to schooling and the full development of child welfare (Arrosi *et al.*, 2022; Carvalho, 2020; Ferrari *et al.*, 2022; Guimarães, 2017). Thus, Brazilian schooling assumes a pedagogical character where caregiving and educational functions are integrated, fostering the development and learning of children in a correlated manner.

In this sense, discussions regarding work with children, the practices exercised in daycare/school environments, and the roles educators play in child development are crucial for understanding the specificities of teaching in early childhood education.

Gnatta *et al.* (2020), in a paper on the role of educators in daycare centers, emphasize the significance of caregiving and educational functions in the nursery as producers of subjective marks and in the formation of a desiring subject. They attribute their work to the similarity with maternal functions, since, following the reformulation of early childhood education guidelines, their work extends beyond physical and cognitive care. That is, the school environment contributes to an integrated development of the subject. Despite the similarities to parental roles, educators' roles differ in strengthening the position occupied by others, toward not prematurely rupturing the parent-baby relationship (Kupfer; Lerner, 2014). Therefore, it is not about replacing parental functions but practicing caregiving in a different way than in the family setting.

It is essential to highlight a key characteristic that distinguishes educator-baby relationships from parental-baby relationships. Even though they do not perform parental functions, educators occupy a place among others that introduces the subject to language and the realm of the symbolic (Kupfer; Lerner, 2014). According to Wiles and Ferrari (2020), as a form of affiliation, the relationship established between parents and children is based on desires and expectations predating the child's arrival. In the educator-baby relationship, it is necessary to reflect on the desire to perform caregiving and educational functions, as it unfolds in a dynamic involving work that, despite being significant, involves different modes of emotional ties. In other words, this relationship is marked by intersections that compose the social position of early childhood education, distinct from the familial setting.

In addition to educators' contributions to subject development, discussions regarding professional conduct and practices within the school context highlight the prevalence of discourse that pressures, hold accountable, and contributes to teacher distress (Voltolini, 2018). This complexity in the field of early childhood education encompasses both caregiving and educational aspects (Kupfer; Lerner, 2014, Wiles; Ferrari, 2020). The need for an intersection between these positions can expose vulnerabilities in this encounter. Moreover, it is influenced by a variety of labor and institutional issues that are inherent to the social position attributed to early childhood education since its inception.

In this regard, according to Martins *et al.* (2014), the accountability for caregiving and education in working with young children results in overload due to the demands placed on

educators. The precariousness of their work, professional turnover, and the devaluation of their roles stemming from the historical perception of caretaking and guardianship, often linking their functions to that of a nanny, can contribute to distress. This distress is also related to how professionals in early childhood education are socially perceived.

The study “*Constituição das doenças da docência*”<sup>7</sup> conducted with teachers from the municipal school system of Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, between 2007 and 2009, aimed to understand the work processes and their implications on teachers' health. The authors found that early childhood education professionals were the most likely to request medical leave. Mental and behavioral disorders were among the main reasons for their absences. These factors are cited as significant causes of illness and consequent absenteeism from the workplace (Vieira *et al.*, 2010).

Vieira *et al.* (2010) also prompt us to reflect on how the reorientation of teaching processes inspired by business management models impacts educational practices. According to the authors, new demands driven by a market perspective prescribe alternative modes of action that challenge the fulfillment of new roles in education. Contradictions in the roles performed by educators, coupled with the demanding educational standards politically established by schools, parents, and educators themselves, influence their interactions with children.

However, despite Rosa's (2022) demonstration that the plurality of discourses promotes various possibilities of meanings and symbolizations, Pereira (2017) argues that the discourse surrounding the care and education of children tends to normalize the distress resulting from these responsibilities. As the social discourse remains univocal, it becomes accepted as truth and carries political and economic interests that seek to maintain social order. Thus, there is a crucial need for scholarly works that reflect on teacher distress specific to early childhood education.

With this premise in mind, the extension project "Support for Nursery Educators - Acting at the Interface between Mental Health and Education" was developed, intending to raise questions about the challenges faced by educators by providing a space for reflection among the professionals involved in the project. This article focuses on the ongoing work and aims to specifically discuss the methodology used for listening to educators, aiming to highlight the uniqueness of the listening circles. Nevertheless, it is necessary to initially outline some

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<sup>7</sup> Constitution of teaching illnesses.

points regarding what causes teacher distress in the context of early childhood education and reflect on ways to address this issue.

### **Listening to Educators' Distress**

Teacher distress, a term consolidated after extensive research on work processes and teacher illness, gained prominence after the significant number of teacher absences for medical reasons was identified, stemming from various factors affecting psychological and social conditions in teaching (Martins *et al.*, 2014). According to Pereira (2017), the inability to assert their role is a recurring complaint among teachers in public early childhood education schools in Brazil. The weaknesses of school organization and intra- and extra-school violence can lead to generalized anxieties that permeate teaching in its various contexts. In addition to a variety of other factors contributing to the occurrence and/or intensification of teacher distress, such as lack of professional recognition, low salaries, and institutional precariousness (Kupfer; Lerner, 2014; Martins *et al.*, 2014; Pereira, 2017; Voltolini, 2018).

Presented as an effect rather than a symptom, Lacan (1962-63/2005) points out that the restlessness of anxiety arises because it is contained within the order of the real and, therefore, not integrated into the chain of signifiers. It is not represented because it is impossible to symbolize. Thus, it manifests through the dimension of the body, as it does not translate into the field of language and plays a vital role in the subjective constitution. According to Pereira (2017), educators' anxiety in their work with children leads to a sense of helplessness and can appear as a source of stagnation, evading and inhibiting itself to avoid confrontation. While helplessness is an original and fundamental condition in the constitution of the subject, it can also manifest in response to the anxiety of being unable to care for others, resulting in experiences of individual suffering and distress (Pereira, 2017). It is important to note that a distinction must be made when helplessness is discussed, as in the context of teaching practice, this effect can emerge as a producer of illness rather than an intrinsic human condition. Therefore, it is essential that discussions on helplessness in this context provoke debate aimed at reflecting on alternative modes of existence in this practice rather than being naturalized.

In this direction, we find various research studies and proposals aimed at creating openings in this context. For example, in their studies on the importance of educators' work in the constitutive process of children, Wiles and Ferrari (2020) alert us to the need for listening spaces for educators. These spaces should allow for the circulation of words, sharing the

impasses experienced in their work with children, and enabling reflection on their practices and anxieties regarding caregiving. They invite us to consider caring for educators through devices such as conversation circles or listening circles (Gianella; Moura, 2009), as intervention possibilities.

Thus, they emphasize the importance of sensitive listening in education, bringing psychoanalysis closer to an experience of care by making themselves emotionally available, beyond interpretive exercises (Wiles; Ferrari, 2020). Therefore, listening circles can serve as a powerful support tool for early childhood education professionals, enabling them to reflect on the importance of their work in caring for children and the anxieties arising from this role. Moreover, they emerge as spaces intended to facilitate the free flow of words, proposing a suspension of hierarchically marked roles or a formation aimed at transmitting external knowledge. Listening circles are based on psychoanalytic ethics, aiming to bring forth the issues of the group collectively.

Considering the theoretical framework outlined, we can further the discussion through the insights of Dunker and Thebas (2021). In their book "*O palhaço e o psicanalista: Como escutar os outros pode transformar vidas*<sup>8</sup>", they note that the psychoanalyst's listening differs from all others in that it involves engagement and seeks, through understanding deviations, slips of the tongue, and what emerges from these phenomena, what unconscious aspects surface when words are spoken. The way the subject is listened to in analysis helps them find meaning in these other forms of communication, allowing them to hear their own discourse differently. Thus, engaged listening does not function as a translation of the unconscious but allows effects to be produced through self-listening.

A parallel can be drawn between the contributions of these authors regarding the effects of self-listening in analysis and self-listening in a group context, as in both settings, transference emerges as a fundamental operator for unfolding. Regarding the effects of subjective transformation in the link between the singular and the group, Jasiner (2007) emphasizes the necessity of the other for the realization of the device. In this sense, the experience with groups "merits offering a social bond in a world that works toward its extinction" (Voltolini, 2018, p. 97, our translation).

Therefore, listening—whether individual or collective—must be guided by a clinical-political practice whose ethics allow socially invisible demands to emerge, or sometimes normalized and silenced ones. Considering the difference in what presents itself to the

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<sup>8</sup> The Clown and the Psychoanalyst: How Listening to Others Can Transform Lives.



psychoanalyst when engaged in public policies, the apparent absence of demand for psychoanalytic intervention is replaced by material deficiencies (Rosa, 2022), as seen with teachers. When addressing issues related to education, complaints focus on poor working conditions or low salary, without considering sociopolitical issues that may underlie teacher distress. Indeed, the goal is not to erase the social position occupied by educators but rather to amplify these issues in the construction of a demand.

According to Dunker and Thebas (2021), psychoanalytic intervention aims to provide space for the subject's speech, enabling their discourse to gain transformative potency over the course of analysis and produce effects. When writing about psychoanalytic practice in critical social situations, Jorge and Emília Broide (2020) emphasize that it is the analyst's duty to create an experimental space that allows for the constitution of a speaking place, where testimony allows the emergence of the subject and their singularity, insofar as they can construct a narrative. In this regard, the authors argue for the presence of psychoanalytic listening in various contexts, not confined to private practice settings, which is crucial for considering the possibilities of articulation between psychoanalysis, education, and group listening.

Such a conception presupposes that the construction of a speaking space is anchored in psychoanalytic ethics and, therefore, capable of transcending the walls of consulting rooms. To achieve this, it must be supported by the "fundamental rule" of free association:

Thus, here is the sole rule of psychoanalysis. It is not on the analyst's side but on the analysand's. This rule is correlated with the very structure of the psychoanalytic field opened by Freud. Free association marks the beginning of psychoanalysis and also the start of each analysis—it is where the analysis must begin. On the analyst's side, apart from the precept of free-floating attention, there are no rules but the ethics of psychoanalysis, governed by the analyst's desire (Quinet, 2016, p. 9, our translation).

The analyst's response lies in maintaining engagement with this speech and distancing themselves from their own resistances that may influence the listening process (Freud, 1912/2021). Based on these premises, it is possible to sustain psychoanalytic work in various contexts without erasing each one's uniqueness.

In this direction, the question posed here concerns how to sustain the space for free association within the scope of the extension project. That is, listening to the demands of this group of early childhood educators considering the particularities of the context and the ethics of psychoanalysis. In this vein, the proposal of listening circles emerged as a potent device,

aiming for the free circulation of speech in a collective dynamic. Next, we will discuss what constitutes listening circles and outline the questions generated through this methodology.

## Listening Circles

The term "Listening circles" was found in the article "*A arte de escutar: nuances de um campo de práticas e de conhecimento*"<sup>9</sup> (Moura; Giannella, 2016). In their paper, the authors discuss how listening can take on various forms with different effects. Drawing from experience in participatory management, they outline different practices, pinpointing which forms truly allow for the emergence of alterity. The authors argue that it is only in this way that one recognizes the potency in the other and, therefore, achieves effective listening. They contend that for participation to have effects, "[...] dialogue is essential, and in this sense, active, sensitive, and deep listening is necessary" (p. 10, our translation). Drawing from various experiences, they discuss the complexity of what constitutes genuine listening, which can be facilitated through specific practices.

In this direction, they describe listening circles as devices originating from the experiences of indigenous peoples in a proposal for deliberation and counsel. The authors highlight how the arrangement of individuals in a circle constitutes an essential element towards suspending hierarchical relations, allowing everyone to be in a similar position, thereby seeking to give equity of importance to the speech of those participating in the space. In this way, dialogue can exist to strengthen the relationships of those present (Moura; Giannella, 2016).

It is viable to articulate these premises with the ethics of psychoanalysis, as a position taken in an attempt to make room for listening to particularities (Dunker; Thebas, 2020). That is the need for implicated listening lies in the premise of the theory, which does not occur automatically but requires an openness in the relationship that allows for the subject's ascension. In this vein, Lacan (1953/1998) distinguishes, for example, between full speech and empty speech. The former occurs when the truth of the unconscious finds space in discourse, whereas empty speech is the position in which the subject does not speak of themselves. Therefore, what is looming on the horizon is that mere speech alone is not sufficient for the work of analysis to occur. Rather, it is necessary for the act of speaking to construct a relationship with the subject's particularities and thereby be open to occurrences of the unconscious, transcending the barriers of established discourse.

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<sup>9</sup> The art of listening: nuances of a field of practices and knowledge.

In this regard, it is possible to draw a parallel between the Lacanian proposition and the article by Moura and Giannella (2016) mentioned earlier on listening. In both cases, it is implied that the transmission of existence does not occur uniformly—that is, both speaking and listening have different layers that, as they become more complex, may allow for the emergence of other forms of dialogue.

Considering these premises, it is important to return to the scope of this work: early childhood education. In this sense, it is necessary to emphasize that there is a multitude of issues that permeate the school environment and consequently affect those involved. Therefore, in developing the extension project, it was necessary to investigate ways to sustain a space for listening to the group of educators who would be involved. The direction taken aimed to provide support for the construction of a collective discourse among professionals about the complexity of the school environment and how each individual is affected by the context they experience. In other words, allowing for the emergence of teacher malaise, but ensuring that both speaking and listening have a dimension capable of producing shifts—not with the intention of suspending teacher malaise, but of providing avenues for addressing it.

To fulfill this intention, it was understood as essential that the listening sessions be conducted by psychologists pursuing their master's degrees. Additionally, the meetings were supervised by the project coordinators, providing a forum for debating issues that arose during the listening circles and strategizing the direction for continued work. The master's students aimed to provide support for the existence of a space for free association, thereby upholding the ethics of psychoanalysis in their intervention. It is important to note that there is no intention to provide answers to the educators' questions, as would be typical in a content-focused training dynamic. The purpose of the listening circles is to open up questioning regarding teacher malaise, thus seeking a framework in which the collective could listen to itself—emphasizing the importance of alterity.

In this regard, it is worthwhile to revisit the propositions regarding the possibility of psychoanalytic listening occurring within a group setting. Emilia and Jorge Broide (2020) question the role of the group device, asserting that such a space must go beyond merely being a strategy that serves a larger number of users and quantitatively benefits institutions. For a genuine function to exist, there needs to be ways to foster a shared demand.

In groups, what is at stake is work centered around a common task—which could involve teaching, supervision, psychological distress, institutional projects, etc.—but there must also be a collective framework and the potential

to bring forth each individual's drama within the shared space (Broide; Broide, 2020, p. 51, our translation).

In this sense, psychoanalysts propose that group work be considered as a clinical instrument. That is, it should support an intervention grounded in theoretical and ethical principles aimed at elaborating on what arises within the group, enhanced by the potential that the collective can build: the experience of alterity. Furthermore, there is a wealth of literature on collective experiences supported by the ethics of psychoanalysis, many of which highlight the potentialities that can emerge from such proposals (Broide; Broide, 2020).

Indeed, psychoanalytic group work constitutes a twist on the traditional setting proposed by Freud; however, the author also explored how the collective affects individuals, particularly examining the relationship between the individual and the social in his work “*Psicologia das massas e análise do eu*<sup>10</sup>”, in which Freud (1921/2021) extensively investigates the role of groups in psychic constitution, emphasizing how identifications are shaped by the collective—elements of the social that shape how individuals recognize themselves.

Entering specific practices within the school environment, Azevedo *et al.* (2021) describe psychoanalytic group listening devices as crucial, where identifications and projections occur as the subject speaks about themselves. For the authors, the collectivization of free association enables the sharing of experiences that contribute to the subject's reintegration into their social bond, as the device constitutes a space for sharing and recognition.

It is this intersection that constitutes the objective of the listening circles proposed in the project, namely, the construction of a collective space that, through the circulation of speech, allows for the opening up of new discourses. With the belief that the circles would produce points of identification among educators in the pursuit of shared knowledge, it presents itself as a proposal for collective construction that moves away from a logic of providing answers produced by an imperative of external knowledge (Broide; Broide, 2020). Highlighting this objective, the following section will present how the listening circles unfolded during the extension project.

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<sup>10</sup> Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.

## The Listening Circles as an Extension Project

Before delving into the description of how the listening circles were structured, it is necessary to clarify that the extension project that gave rise to this paper unfolded in three phases. The first phase involved the project coordinators visiting the school. During this meeting, akin to an initial interview, the institution's demands and the expectations of its managers regarding the project's implementation were heard. In this context, the interventions to be carried out and the necessary arrangements for the subsequent phase were clarified.

The second phase involved weekly monitoring of Nursery I and II classes, each consisting of approximately twelve infants and two educators<sup>11</sup>. The work was conducted through observation of the infants and their interaction with the educators, aiming to identify early potential impacts on the babies' development and psychic constitution. To achieve this, the play was used as a device for expression and creative experience, based on the premise that through play, impulses, desires, and experiences whose real, symbolic, and imaginary aspects intertwine can be observed (Ferrari, *et al.*, 2017; Silva, *et al.*, 2021).

The third phase corresponded to the execution of the listening circles with the educators. The idea arose from previous work linked to the extension project involving the monitoring of infants and their educators in nursery classes, where it was identified that there was a lack of attention focused on the professionals, while simultaneously recognizing the fundamental importance of their role in the development of the children present (Arrosi *et al.*, 2022; Wiles; Ferrari, 2020). In this sense, the listening circles proved to be a device for the circulation of speech that allowed educators to freely associate regarding the questions that emerged in the classroom, as well as the challenges of working with early childhood education.

For this phase, a space separated from the other classrooms was reserved so that educators could distance themselves as best as possible, considering the institution's structure and their work environments, and providing the privacy that the circles required. The meetings were mediated by two psychology master's students who facilitated the discussions that arose and alternated in recording the meetings<sup>12</sup>. Each meeting led to the construction of a clinical diary, described by Silva *et al.* (2022) as a recording method that allowed the master's students to narratively describe the circles based on their own experience.

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<sup>11</sup> This monitoring was carried out by the following scholarship holders and Psychology students: Arthur Patuzzi, Felipe Sant'Ana Vargas, Gabriela Nagel Pinho, and Luise Lindermann Kunzler.

<sup>12</sup> The listening circles were mediated by the following master's degree psychologists: Cândida Prates Dantas and Maria Eduarda Tenório Brito de Oliveira Farias.

Regarding the organization of the space where the meetings took place, several chairs were arranged side by side to form a large circle. Educators sat down so that participants could look at each other without obstruction. This format was designed to facilitate speaking, listening, and observing the scenes that emerged from each shared account, as well as to construct a collective space that enabled listening to oneself and others.

At the beginning of the first meeting, it was essential to clarify the purpose of the listening circles, as well as the reasons that sparked the desire to carry out this intervention. The mediators made themselves available to listen to the educators' demands and suggestions for conducting the meetings, similar to the way a symbolic contract is elaborated in the analytic setting. In this contract, issues of confidentiality, the days and times of the circles, and the importance of respecting each other's speech were discussed. Due to the turnover of educators, it was necessary to review the contract at the start of some meetings, especially when it was the first participation of any of the educators. It is important to note that the professionals participated voluntarily and could withdraw from their involvement at any time, if they wished to do so.

As an intervention grounded in psychoanalysis, the listening circles relied on educators' free association in the hope that their demands, repressions, and repetitions from collectively shared experiences would emerge from the unconscious. To recognize these issues, free-floating attention was employed as a tool to sustain suspended attention from the mediators, aiming to withhold a specific inclination towards what was being said, thereby promoting an encounter between unconscious minds (Freud, 1912/2021).

The listening circles took place monthly from July to December 2023, during which educators discussed issues related to their work with children, as well as how the exercise of their roles impacts their personal lives. In one circle, a teacher described her feelings about facing the challenges of managing a lively class of 23 children alone. "*I felt down for about 3 days, feeling incapable of continuing with the class,*" she said. She added that on returning home that day, she decided to take a solitary walk, couldn't pay attention to her daughters, and felt worn out as both a mother and educator.

Among the most recurrent themes raised by the educators were the precarious working conditions, the undervaluation of early childhood education work, doubts about their capabilities, work overload in education, and the lack of family involvement in children's school lives.

According to the reports, families' lack of recognition of educators' work stems from seeing school "*as a place of custody*," similar to the welfare-oriented view upon which Brazilian primary education was founded. Thus, it exposes the presence of social markers regarding the difference in the role the school plays for poorer families versus middle-class families. In this regard, a teacher emphasized the distinction, stating that middle-class families, especially those who send their children to private schools, see school as a place for education that provides care, education, and child development. However, poorer families view early childhood education schools as a safe place for their children to stay while they work and seem not to perceive the school's relevance in child development. When this statement was made, the other educators present indicated agreement, nodding in agreement with the colleague's words and gestures.

Throughout the listening circles, there was a noticeable increase in interaction among the educators, enabling the articulation of strategies on how to handle specific situations regarding their work with children and families. At the end of each session, we consistently received feedback from the educators, most of which pertained to how they felt about sharing the challenges of their work. "*We feel relieved, it's good to vent and talk about how we feel because this year has been very challenging*," they would say. At times, the institution's managers conveyed signs of the educators' desire for the circles to continue. "*The teachers really like the circles, they always ask when you (referring to the mediators) will come back here... We want you to return and continue with us next year.*"

It was reports like the ones mentioned above highlighted the effectiveness of the listening circles as a care device and as a space for emancipatory development that allows educators to recognize their roles in social discourse (Voltolini, 2018). Consequently, a transition in the issues raised by the participants was identified, as in the initial circles, they sought prescriptive answers regarding their actions, a discursive position that diminished over time. They began to raise their questions, reflecting on how their experiences in the classroom and the stories they heard in the sessions affected them.

The listening circles seem to have prompted reflections on their teaching practices. For example, when discussing the challenges of working with atypical children and the need to contain them during crises, one educator questioned the limits of her role: "*How far can an educator go?*" Such questioning is a moment of openness, where the dialogue in the listening circle prompts a query about their practice, not leading to a single answer but stimulating thoughts about their impact within this context. Other colleagues noted similar daily reflections.

Moreover, through the reports from the circles, it was observed that educators began to view their own issues and emotions, as well as those of others, with empathy, suggesting mutual support through small gestures in their daily interactions. "*Since we spend the whole day inside the classroom, we don't always know what happens in our colleagues' rooms, and with the circles, we realized they go through similar situations as us... We need to practice more solidarity, help each other,*" remarked one educator, recognizing the importance of collective work. Sharing these insights from the experience of the listening circles underscores the significance of encountering alterity, both as a means to reconsider their own practices and to allow for emotional impacts that relationships with others can produce, thereby facilitating shifts in affective responses.

### Final considerations

The present article aimed to discuss the experience of an extension project carried out in a preschool, explicitly reflecting on the methodology of listening circles used in the intervention with educators. The choice of this approach was grounded in the article "*A arte de escutar: nuances de um campo de práticas e de conhecimento*<sup>13</sup>" (Moura; Giannella, 2016). The authors engage in a discussion about the different modes of listening and highlight the listening circle as a potent practice for the emergence of alterity relationships—where listening occurs in a non-hierarchical manner, thus opening up the construction of collective knowledge.

The propositions about the listening circles were articulated with psychoanalytic theory to support the establishment of a free space for the circulation of speech, aimed at the collective elaboration of a common demand. In this direction, it was essential to draw on theoretical productions that examine how different contexts intersect in analytic listening, considering how modes of subjectivation are influenced by socio-political issues (Rosa, 2022; Broide; Broide, 2020).

The combination of these points was essential for the implementation of the listening circles in the extension project, especially as they form the pillars of the work, without erasing the specificities that mark listening in the context of early childhood education. The listening circles, guided by the ethics of psychoanalysis, aimed to be a space for the elaboration of teachers' discomfort, without pretending to simplify the complexity of this endeavor.

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<sup>13</sup> The art of listening: nuances of a field of practices and knowledge.



The circles proved to be a powerful resource for the professional development of educators, enabling the emergence of questions regarding teaching knowledge and facilitating gradual changes in their practice. Thus, these shifts emerge as transferential effects of the encounter, as a device that addresses issues within the realms of professional, formative, and personal development (Voltolini, 2018). In this sense, the circles also operated as a means of caring for educators, mainly through the establishment of bonds of alterity that emerged from these meetings.

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