



## Consultation on **DISCRIMINATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

A study from the perspective of the community  
education in schools in Brazil, Peru and Colombia

Realization



Campana  
Latinoamericana  
por el Derecho  
a la Educación

In collaboration with



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Save the Children







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**REGIONAL REPORT**

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COMISSÃO NACIONAL  
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**Issue released by:**

Campaña Latinoamericana por el Derecho a la Educación.

**Contributors to the research:**

Campaña Nacional por el Derecho a la Educación de Brasil, Coalición Colombiana por el Derecho a la Educación, Campaña Peruana por el Derecho a la Educación, en el marco del Programa Niños con Todos sus Derechos.

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Foro de Educación y Desarrollo Humano de la Iniciativa por Nicaragua.

Foro por el Derecho a la Educación en el Paraguay.

Red de Educación Popular entre Mujeres (REPEM).

**Support for research**

Fundación Abrinq - Save the Children.

PLAN Internacional.

**Other organizations supporting the CLADE**

ActionAid International.

Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (AECID).

Asociación Alemana para la Educación de Adultos (AAEA).

Global Partnership for Education.

Ayuda en Acción.

Open Society Foundation.

Oxfam Novib.

UNICEF - Oficina para América Latina y el Caribe.

OREALC / UNESCO Santiago.

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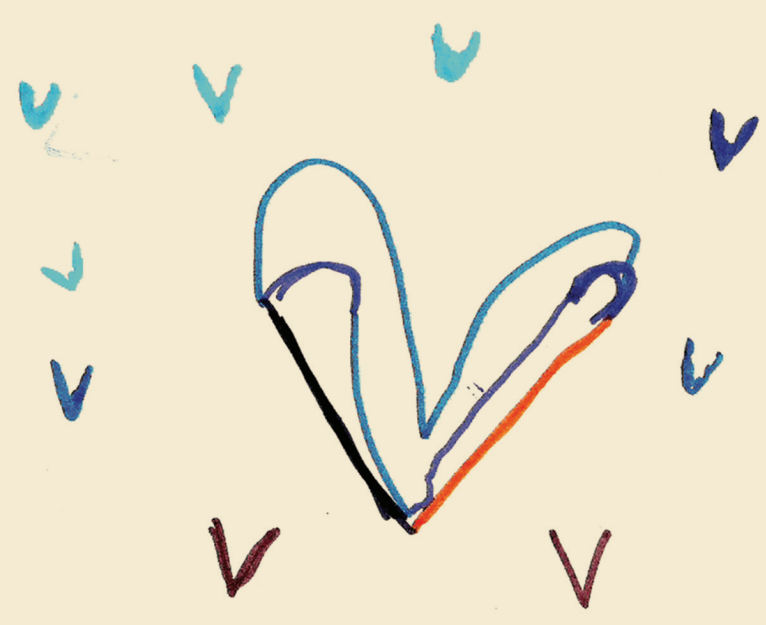
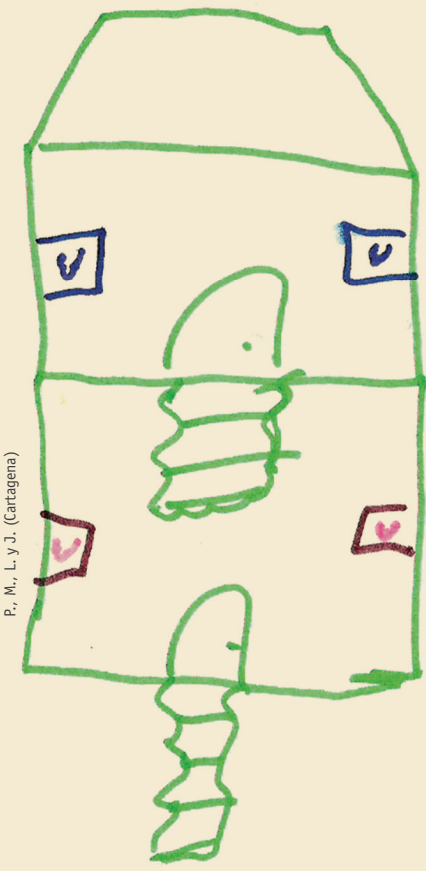
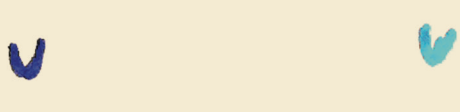
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L., EN (Cartagena)





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# Introduction

## Reason and purpose of this Consultation

“No, there is no discrimination here. Not here, maybe in the school next door.” This is how many conversations started, throughout this consultation, in many early childhood education communities, in public schools in Peru, Colombia and Brazil. In the interviews, some minutes later, clear and true testimonies of discriminatory practices taking place within the education environment came up. These situations show how challenging this research was.

The struggle against all forms of discrimination, against any person, across the world, is the tenor of human rights norms and instruments. However, overcoming discrimination is a pending issue in Latin America and the Caribbean. And even worse, there is a tendency to hide and deny racism, sexism and multiple forms of discrimination, as well as its consequences, which reinforces inequality and the violation of fundamental economic, social and cultural rights. For CLADE, a key way of overcoming discrimination is revealing them and this is why the Campaign, for some years, has been engaging in actions around this issue that holds a privileged position within CLADE’s political agenda.

If different forms of discrimination are present in different daily aspects, they are also present in school life, throughout its different stages and early childhood is not an exception. In the early stages of learning, some exclusion processes can be observed and this research confirms this in different ways. Discrimination based on low age is common, and this is even serious when other discriminations intersect, based on ethnicity, race, gender or any other form that does not follow the so-called standards, what is considered to be “normal.”

This phenomenon can be seen in legal and normative spaces, in public policies, in daily school life, and inside classrooms. CLADE decides to carry out this Consultation on Discrimination in Early Childhood Education, throughout 2011 and 2012 in Brazil, Colombia and Peru, with the objective of finding out how discrimination, particularly in education contexts, towards small children, has been taking place. In each of these three countries, the consultation was carried out in a big city and in another municipality considered to be smaller compared to the national average. In Colombia, Bogotá and Cartagena were the cities chosen; in Peru, Lima and Urubamba. In Brazil work was carried out in Fortaleza (Ceará) and Baixa Grande (Bahía). A total of 12 schools participated, 4 in each country.

Through investigation, this consultation sought to find out to what extent and how discrimination is perceived by the actors involved, in education institutions, and to investigate how discriminatory practices have an impact on children. On the other hand, another purpose of the consultation was to find out if the institution fights discrimination and the strategies adopted to overcome this. For methodological purposes, priority was given to age groups between 4 and 8.

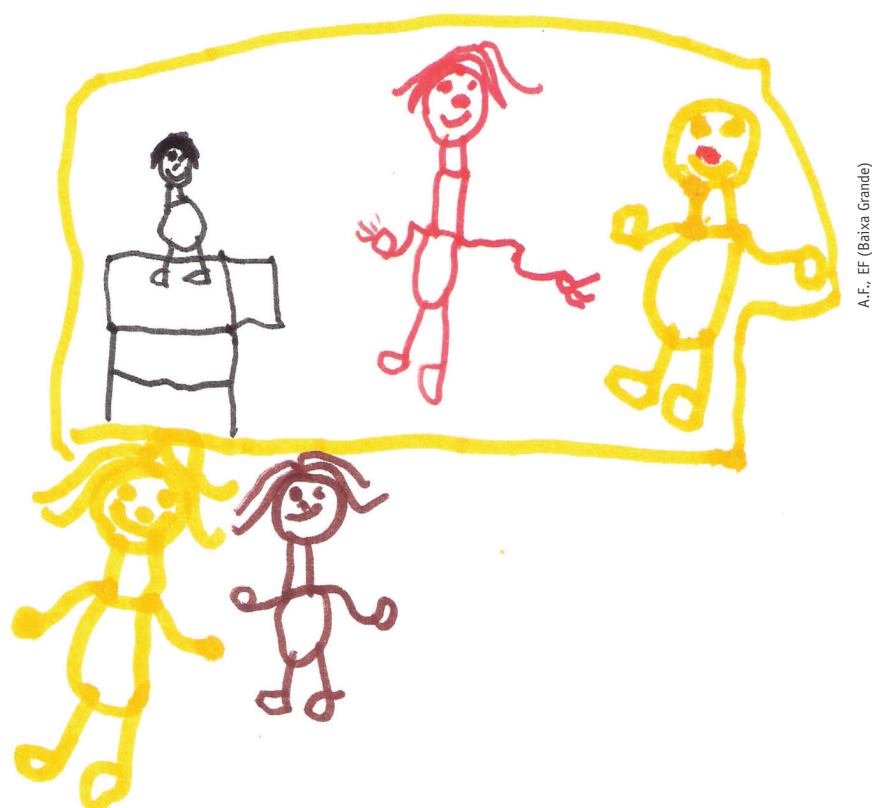
And who were the individuals consulted? A key aspect of this research was its participatory nature, that is to say, based on the perceptions of members of the education community – teachers, directors, school staff, parents and, in particular, small children. In the same way as recent research does, this study involves, in an innovative way, small children as individuals who can be consulted on what they think and how they feel about issues that concern their lives instead of evaluating them and defining their peculiarities.



Children have their own ways of understanding and feeling the different things they experience. It is important to bear in mind that there is a slowly consolidation of positions that consider that children are capable of expressing their own feelings and perceptions, leaving aside the common practice of consulting adults to get information about them just because they are closer to children. The current definition of the right of the child, enshrined in the International Convention on Children’s Rights (1989), in its article 12, establishes: “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” Furthermore, this listening exercise is fundamental for better decision-making by responsible adults.

In this publication, we share not only the findings but we also describe the methodological process and the path followed. The “Introduction”





somehow includes the reflections we have based on. We pose this question: what education do we need and for what kind of society? So as to further position the debates on early childhood education; what is currently at stake? Afterwards, a brief historical revision on discriminations in early childhood so as to further draw an overview of discrimination currently observed in children's education, its challenges and characteristics in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In the Section on "Methodology" we describe the tools used throughout the Consultation so as to be able to listen to the education community. One of the main features of our research is the use of a number of strategies so as to understand the perspective of the individuals involved, and, in particular, underscoring the strategies used to listen to small children. These strategies are available and can be used and adapted to different contexts and realities.

In "Our Findings" we actually share what we found on the ground. We present what children said, what adults said and finally, we highlight 10 significant findings of our

Consultation. We do this from different points of view as this report is the result of meetings and debates among consultants and researchers, and with national forums related to CLADE. Furthermore, it makes the additional effort to go back to education communities so as to share the systematized data and get their opinion about it.

Finally, in “Recommendations”, CLADE exposes some points that are considered to be fundamental for the realization of the right to education for all in early childhood, without discrimination.

We express our most sincere gratitude to the different allied organizations, researchers, collaborators who participated in each stage of the consultation. We would like to thank, in particular, those schools that opened their doors to this research process, willing to talk about this highly sensitive issue. We hope we are able to generate debates and reflections, inspire other researches with new questions, and, above all, offer information and recommendations on policies and practices aiming to turn school into a space of coexistence and dignity for life.



V. (Cartagena)



# Highlights

# Our highlights: 10 points to bear in mind

## **1 In Early Childhood Education Centers multiple forms of discrimination are expressed.**

Upon being consulted whether they had suffered any kind of discrimination in the exercise of their duties, more than half of the interviewees (54%) replied affirmatively. When they were asked if they had observed any kind of discrimination at school, 61% confirmed that they did. Finally, when the same question was asked with multiple options, that is to say, with a list of different forms of discrimination, said percentage increased to 78%. Among the most common forms of discrimination, the following stand out: traits that are not appreciated by society, social and economic conditions, race, sexual orientation, disability, geographic location, religion, age, migratory status, and indigenous origin.

Children have mentioned different forms of discrimination. Perception, reproduction and judgment mainly stand out in their reports but they always confirm the existence of discriminatory practices in their contexts. They do it explicitly, when a child says, for example, *"I did not take a picture because he is dark skinned and I don't like black children"* or *"black children (...) are many times dirty children who do not take a bath and they are lazy"*. Or when a group affirms, towards a girl with disability, that *"people did not want to stay with her because she was in a wheelchair and they weren't."*

## **2 There is a tendency to deny discrimination, to hide it and pretend it does not exist.**

This was observed in different ways, particularly in adults' relationships. In the first contacts with schools, it was possible to confirm this phenomenon, when the responsible people affirmed that the research was welcomed in that school, however, they suggested looking for another school because *"there was no discrimination there."* In the interviews, it was common to observe, at the beginning, a certain prevailing feeling: *"this does not happen here, only outside."* But then the existence of discrimination was confirmed through the reports and the responses given in the questionnaire.

It was also observed through a higher number of people who confirmed the existence of discrimination in the education center. If, generally speaking, a 61% replied that discrimination had already been observed at schools, this percentage increased up to 78% when the interviewees were given multiple options with concrete examples. In general, they deny it when mentioned as such but they confirm it when they are given concrete examples. Many times, the interviewers observed that a certain story, with clear discriminatory aspects, was not included as such by the interviewee in the questionnaire. That is to say, they were not able to make an immediate connection between the narrated story and a form of discrimination.

The same trend can be seen in different studies and practices in Latin America and the Caribbean. In our region, as we state in the presentation of this report, although discriminatory practices are extremely serious, they tend to remain invisible, and there is also a denial of racism, sexism and multiple forms of discrimination, as well as its consequences. The denial of these processes is interconnected with the discomfort produced by self-recognizing or admitting that the society you live in is racist and discriminatory. The denial of discrimination is also interconnected with the discomfort created by the notion of conflict, the difficulty to recognize that conflict is legitimate and the non violent resolution of conflict is a challenge, and it is also a challenge to recognize plurality and debate as determining features of democracy.

### 3 Discrimination for being outside the “ideal” or “model” standards of society.

In the concept introduction of this Consultation, we referred to the tendency to homogenize and create a “model” that can be used as a parameter for society; a society that denies difference and plurality. Therefore, there is no space for critical thinking, imagination and creativity, instead, seeking a pre-determined standard is enough. If you do not meet this imagined profile, you need to adapt, to set aside differences and try to meet the expected model. This principle, already studied by different authors and threatening human dignity, is confirmed in this consultation. When 44% of the interviewees say that they had already observed discrimination by traits not appreciated by society, they are precisely referring to these people whose different nature is judged in a negative way.



D. (Lima)

Another example is the reaction of adults towards the phrase: “Yes to difference, no to inequality.” Even though it is true that a significant percentage (67%) agreed, researchers’ reports reveal the difficulty that participants had to understand the meaning of this phrase. This implies that interviewees are not familiar with concepts and debates on something that is essential to overcome discrimination: the celebration of difference, diversity and plurality.

## **4 Redistribution and acknowledgment: a double call.**

When a list of different forms of discrimination was presented, 44% of the interviewees said that they had already observed discrimination based on traits not appreciated by society and 43% mentioned income and poverty conditions. We believe that the interpretation of data has to be made taking into account the approach proposed by Nancy Fraser. According to this philosopher, seeking justice requires redistribution as well as recognition, articulating the “defendable demands of social equality with the defendable demands of acknowledgment of difference.” Although the struggles for non discrimination and recognition many times oppose the struggles for redistribution, this is a false antithesis and we believe it is essential to recognize that both are intrinsically connected.

## **5 The forms of discriminatory practices are very varied and include different aspects of daily school life and the relationships between individuals.**

Methodological instruments of the Consultation did not fully capture the dimension of access to school; they mainly concentrated on the individuals’ perception of daily practices. In this way, discrimination started to take shape in the narrated stories. Upon enquiries about forms of discrimination, the following came up, in the order they were mentioned: humiliations and jokes, insults, low expectations in terms of learning, physical violence, isolation, exclusion from pedagogic activities.

Some of the interviewed adults confirmed the concerns of this consultation such as ethnic and racial or socioeconomic discrimination. An interviewee said that *“there had been aggressions from the mother of a white child, towards a black child. She shook him, they went to the Police Station and referred the case to the courts.”* Some professors say *“that student, apart from being retarded, he is stupid, and also black, as you could*

*imagine.” Another person recalled the case of a “mother who did not want her daughter to dance with a poor boy” and also that “there are children that are better treated according to the clothes they are wearing.”*

Stories on discrimination by gender identity and sexual orientation have acquired great significance in the systematization of data. In the stimulated response, 51% of the interviewees recognized the existence of this phenomenon at their school. One of them gave an example and told us that *“the teacher arrived and told me: this person ... what kind of moral behavior is he going to have here? I replied: teacher, I am not interested in his life outside this school (...) How can the school hire a gay teacher?”* Similarly, 48% of them agreed on the existence of appropriate roles and games for boys and different ones for girls.

The initial hypotheses of the research did not include a form of discrimination that was raised in several interviews, as the first answer to the question “have you suffered any kind of discrimination in the exercise of your duties?” This is discrimination in job positions and 23% of the interviewees mentioned it. One of them explained: “people who are simply in a higher position, feel they are better, superior. Sometimes, they even forget to invite to the events promoted by the school”. Generally, this form of discrimination was expressed crosscut or intersected by others such as gender and race.

This was observed particularly in the testimonies of people performing certain functions, such as those providing support or cleaning services. The researchers’ reports reveal that there are people – particularly women – who are discriminated in a silent way, based on their role or position. They are not necessarily ill-treated or insulted, or prevented from doing something, they are simply ignored. This is a silent learning that children get at school, on the social position of people. They internalize it as a “natural fact” and this influences their points of view, their ways of thinking, of acting.

The most common way in which discriminations appear among children, is through exclusion or segregation, particularly from their games and groups of friends. Nobody wanted to play with the child *“because Joao’s friends are white! White children do not play with black children because white people only play with white people,”* a group said. *“Football is a boy’s game”* and *“girls would never be allowed to play it,”* another one affirmed.

The gender issue particularly calls the attention among boys and girls. *“Girls are feminine and boys are masculine, therefore, girls must hate boys because they do not let them play and boys must hate girls because ... they are girls!”* a group said. *“This is a boy’s toy!” they do not know how to play.”*

## 6 Children give their opinion, reproduce experiences and judge discriminatory situations

Children express customs, information, values they have acquired and owned throughout their personal and school experience. The experiences in more judgmental environments tend to influence their behavior, because they reproduce discriminatory expressions and actions, and it is not unusual that they tell where they have observed it. *"Girls have to play with girls and boys with boys,"* because *"the professor said that we cannot play with boys"*, a girl said. The same is observed in situations opposing discrimination. *"The girls of my school in Sao Paulo, wanted to play football every day, and boys would not let them. My schoolmates would tell them: "No, it's not possible." I was crazy to tell them ... I was crazy to tell them: "No, can't they? Then why do we watch them play on TV? Girls cannot play? Yes, they can!"*

On the other hand, at this age they already show in a quite emphatic way, that they can be sensitized and they can judge certain situations. On the discrimination situations appearing in the stories, for example, we could notice their capacity to be in others' shoes, a response observed in the vast majority of the groups and expressed in phrases such as: "He got sad, annoyed" or "he suffered and cried," "he gets sad, it's mean to talk to him like that" "that's bad because Joao does not like to be screamed at", "he would feel very bad, he would get sad and cry."

## 7 Physical violence and gender violence are present in education centers.

In the methodological section of this report, we indicated that listening to children is important, not only to understand what they think on issues concerning their lives, but it is also important for a better understanding of situations, providing information that sometimes adults did not provide or did not perceive. In our Consultation, an example of this phenomenon was observed in the case of violence. Children have provided valuable information about physical violence and also about gender violence, and this did not happen in such a remarkable way in the interviews held with adults.

When children tell stories about school and their relationship with friends, they narrate violent situations. A boy was saying that adults did not let him play and



they said swear words; girls complain that “boys beat them and do not let them do their class work. On the other hand, the persistence of physical punishment came up in the children’s report, from three countries. In Brazil, a girl said that the teacher “is good, does not beat us, and does not punish us much.” In Colombia, children reported that in a class showed to the consultant, they had been locked up because they had misbehaved. In Peru, a group expressed that the teacher beats them if they misbehave.

Additionally, the children themselves referred to situations related to gender violence. “They are bad, they would beat us;” “they are stupid;” “they grab girls and beat them” a girl said about the boys. With relation to the story about the girl in a wheelchair, once again the rest of the girls showed their concern; “she is afraid that boys might run and bump her,” or “she is afraid of falling off the chair and hitting the curb with her head” or another group of girls who mentioned the risk this girl ran of being hurt by the boys: they said that they were mean, they did not help her and she could get hurt.

## **8 More spaces to participate and listen are needed for children and for the education community in general.**

In some groups of children participating in the Consultation, a lack of motivation was evident and therefore they showed little capacity to express themselves through the dynamics. In some cases, the smaller ones are undervalued and this is reproduced at school and can be observed in society in general, where children’s point of view is excluded.

Although 88% of adults considered that children in early childhood are able to express their opinion and interests and that they should be considered, in school visits we observed a lack of spaces and motivation to this end. As previously mentioned, it is not enough to agree with this principle, we need to put in practice strategies, mechanisms, and adequate spaces to enable their participation and free expression.

Furthermore, the interviewers’ reports underscore the lack of listening practices for adults and for the education community in general. The vast majority of cleaning workers and doormen, for example, revealed that it was the first time that they had been asked for an opinion on issues related to the school. Some teachers equally demanded more spaces for debate and participation.

## 9 Children value good relations with peers and school environment

Children highlighted some important features of the school environment they would like, and they were always related to friendship, games and coexistence: “have fun playing with my girlfriends, playing hide and seek,” “she is nice because she likes to play with me,” “draw, paint, watch movies, play with the computer, watch TV,” “read with my schoolmates during break time.” They like nice places, with flowers and colors like the garden and they dislike ugly places, with broken chairs and bad odor, “when trees are damaged,” “or when plants die.” For example regarding their relation with nature: “we were all sad” because the tree “belongs to mother nature” and because “it made us happy, and attracted many children to play,” “I used to play here,” on a cut-off tree trunk at school.

These statements are fundamental for curriculum design and pedagogic projects at this stage of learning, and, as already mentioned at the beginning, they need to value the development of pedagogic approaches focused on the interests and the daily experience of children, trying to promote their participation, initiative and creativity, autonomy and self-confidence.

## 10 “The idea can be changed”

A very interesting aspect that came up in some of the children’s interviews was the possibility of anticipating positions from new experiences. This was observed in some of the groups, throughout the dynamics. One of the examples is related to the case of the girl in a wheelchair. After several children refused to play with this girl on account that she was not able to play because she could not move, some of them came up with alternatives or possibilities. “She can talk to her schoolmates” or play cops and robbers, she could be the delegate and remain seated, only looking at cops’ faces.” A boy said that another boy did not want to share his ball because only boys play football. After the exchange, he wanted to continue the story and said that the character had thought it over and changed his mind, he would now let girls play football.

For CLADE, to admit the existence of discriminatory practices is the first step to overcoming them. One of the virtues of this consultation is precisely to provoke a reflection where the individuals by themselves manage to perceive this and express it. The next



step is to find ways to overcome it, and the following exercise involves all members of the education community and even those at different levels of the education policy, in a dialogue.

We agree with Professor Peter Moss, who proposes to consider early childhood education institutions also as spaces for policy practice, more specifically, for democratic policy practice. In everyday life, this can be reflected in daily efforts to solve problems using different skills, providing different alternatives, intergenerational coexistence and also among peers. It also turns into increased participation of parents and community. This gives place to really inclusive processes where decisions are taken based on dialogue.





V. (Cartagena)



# Recommendations

As we highlighted in the first pages of this study, for CLADE, the fight against all forms of discrimination, even if it's the tenor of the human rights norms and instruments, remains unfulfilled in Latin America and the Caribbean. Therefore, for some years, the Campaign has been engaging in actions on this issue, such as this consultation focused on early childhood. Based on the findings of this study, the Campaign ratifies its commitment to continue doing advocacy for the human right to education and against all forms of discrimination, particularly in early childhood, and leaves 10 recommendations that are recognized as *sine que non* conditions to reach this end:



- 1 *All children should be considered rights holders, as stated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and discrimination by race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, economic position, physical impairment, birth or any other condition of the child, of his/her parents or legal representatives, should be banned. We underscore that the children's rights are superior, particularly their right to participation and the need to overcome the adult-centered culture.*
- 2 *Early childhood education has to be recognized as a fundamental human right, the first stage of the human right to education and the State is guarantor of this right that is universal and free. All forms of discrimination constitute a violation of this right.*
- 3 *The existence of multiple forms of discrimination in society has to be recognized as a first step to overcoming them, and they are produced and reproduced in early childhood education. Finally it is important to highlight that age- in this case small children – is in itself a discrimination factor.*
- 4 *Inequality as well as multiple forms of discrimination that persist in our region have to be recognized as expressions of injustice that cannot be separated and they are the driving force of social and educational exclusion suffered in the continent as well as the main obstacle for the realization of the right to education and the rest of the human rights. These factors of injustice start to be seen already in early childhood, and they start to reproduce. For a world that promotes a human rights culture and dignity, it is essential to acknowledge that early childhood education is a fundamental place and space to overcome discrimination.*

- 5 *The political and pedagogic project of education, starting with early childhood education, has to focus on overcoming stereotypes and valuing diversity, cooperation and dialogue, promoting school as a space for human rights based education, as a space to meet and exercise democracy. In this sense, the existence of spaces to listen and hold dialogues, have to be part of school structure.*
- 6 *States must give priority to a sustained and long-term integral policy of teachers' training based on Human Rights Education. For this purpose, they have to offer - on a free basis and according to teachers' possibilities - pedagogic training and content to exercise and convey human right values as well as specific material oriented to different age groups.*
- 7 *The gender issue has to be dealt with from early childhood, with emphasis on gender violence prevention. The people involved in education systems need to have access and be able to reflect on the use of tools for the deconstruction of patriarchal ideology and to question masculine power at the core of social organization.*
- 8 *The non violent resolution of conflicts has to be promoted from a tender age as well as overcoming the idea of punishment as the solution, including the creation of legal frameworks to ban physical punishment. Additionally, it is important to understand that violence shows absence of democratic practices and dialogue to solve conflict, absence of practices to promote plurality as part of democracy.*
- 9 *The development of policy and legal frameworks respecting diversity and valuing plurality has to be promoted: the States in Latin America and the Caribbean have to ratify and implement all the group of international laws that recognize the importance of overcoming all forms of discrimination and they also need to incorporate this paradigm in the legal frameworks at national level.*
- 10 *A culture of human rights has to be promoted, and this necessarily involves overcoming all forms of discrimination in society, what pushes us to work for the democratization of spaces beyond school. We need to make huge efforts to use dialogue, to disseminate and raise awareness among all citizens, engaging different actors, and, in particular, the members of the education community itself. The means of communication play a strategic role in this sense, they are fundamental to support popular cultures that are human rights sensitive.*





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