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Early childhood education as an autonomous subsystem: pedagogical foundations, legal framework and the tension of the Initiation Class in Angolan primary schools

A educação de infância como subsistema autónomo: fundamentos pedagógicos, enquadramento jurídico e a tensão da Classe de Iniciação nas escolas do Ensino Primário em Angola

La educación infantil como subsistema autónomo: fundamentos pedagógicos, marco jurídico y la tensión de la Clase de Iniciación en las escuelas de Enseñanza Primaria de Angola

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Abstract:
Preschool education is often reduced, in public discourse and institutional practice, to a stage of preparation for primary school. This article defends the opposite thesis: early childhood education is where the child's personality begins to be built and, in the metaphor guiding this study, the foundation is not the blueprint of the house but the house itself rising. Using a qualitative, documentary and legal-hermeneutic approach, it analyses Law No. 32/20 of 12 August, which amends the Basic Law of the Education and Teaching System (Law No. 17/16), the Constitution of Angola, child-protection legislation and the relevant pedagogical literature. The findings show that the Basic Law establishes the Preschool Education Subsystem as one of six subsystems and one of four levels of the system (arts. 17 and 21), with two stages and its own typology of institutions (arts. 23, 58 and 59), yet allows, in art. 23(2), the Initiation Class to be taught in primary schools. It is argued that this possibility, when turned into the rule, hollows out the subsystem and undermines its systematic and teleological coherence, even if it is not, strictly speaking, unlawful. Measures are proposed for expanding the network of institutions, strengthening educator training and revising the legal text.

Keywords: Early childhood education; Preschool Education Subsystem; Initiation Class; Law No. 32/20; Angola.

Resumo:
A Educação Pré-Escolar é frequentemente reduzida, nos discursos públicos e na prática institucional, a uma etapa de preparação para o Ensino Primário. Este artigo sustenta a tese contrária: a educação de infância é o início da construção da personalidade da criança e, na metáfora que orienta o estudo, o alicerce não é o projeto da casa, mas a própria casa a erguer-se. Com uma abordagem qualitativa, de natureza documental e hermenêutico-jurídica, analisam-se a Lei n.º 32/20, de 12 de Agosto, que altera a Lei de Bases do Sistema de Educação e Ensino (Lei n.º 17/16), a Constituição da República de Angola, a legislação de proteção da criança e a literatura pedagógica relevante. Os resultados mostram que a Lei de Bases consagra o Subsistema de Educação Pré-Escolar como um dos seis subsistemas e um dos quatro níveis

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do sistema (arts. 17.º e 21.º), com duas etapas e uma tipologia própria de instituições (arts. 23.º, 58.º e 59.º), mas admite, no n.º 2 do art. 23.º, que a Classe de Iniciação seja ministrada em escolas do Ensino Primário. Argumenta-se que esta faculdade, quando convertida em regra, esvazia o subsistema e contraria a sua coerência sistemática e teleológica, ainda que não constitua, em sentido estrito, uma ilegalidade. Propõem-se medidas de expansão da rede de instituições, de formação de educadores e de revisão normativa.

Palavras-chave: Educação de infância; Subsistema de Educação Pré-Escolar; Classe de Iniciação; Lei n.º 32/20; Angola.

Resumen:
La Educación Preescolar suele reducirse, en los discursos públicos y en la práctica institucional, a una etapa de preparación para la Enseñanza Primaria. Este artículo sostiene la tesis contraria: la educación infantil es el comienzo de la construcción de la personalidad del niño y, en la metáfora que orienta el estudio, los cimientos no son el proyecto de la casa, sino la propia casa que se levanta. Mediante un enfoque cualitativo, documental y hermenéutico-jurídico, se analizan la Ley n.º 32/20, de 12 de agosto, que modifica la Ley de Bases del Sistema de Educación y Enseñanza (Ley n.º 17/16), la Constitución de la República de Angola, la legislación de protección del niño y la literatura pedagógica relevante. Los resultados muestran que la Ley de Bases consagra el Subsistema de Educación Preescolar como uno de los seis subsistemas y uno de los cuatro niveles del sistema (arts. 17 y 21), con dos etapas y una tipología propia de instituciones (arts. 23, 58 y 59), pero admite, en el apartado 2 del art. 23, que la Clase de Iniciación se imparta en escuelas de Enseñanza Primaria. Se argumenta que esta posibilidad, convertida en regla, vacía el subsistema y contradice su coherencia sistemática y teleológica, aunque no constituya, en sentido estricto, una ilegalidad. Se proponen medidas de expansión de la red institucional, formación de educadores y revisión normativa.

Palabras clave: Educación infantil; Subsistema de Educación Preescolar; Clase de Iniciación; Ley n.º 32/20; Angola.

1. Introduction

When people in Angola and many other countries ask what early childhood education is for, the most common answer is that it prepares children for school. This formulation appears in the discourse of parents and administrators, in public institutions' action programmes and, as will be seen, even in the rules organising the education system. It is an understandable answer, because entry into primary education is a visible, measurable milestone. However, it is incomplete, and that incompleteness has practical consequences: where childhood is viewed as an antechamber to school, its resources, spaces and professionals tend to be treated as accessories.

This article starts from the opposite conviction, which should be stated clearly. Children do not enter the world as blank surfaces waiting to be filled by school; they arrive as subjects who feel, explore, ask questions and construct meanings from their earliest days. In this sense, early childhood education does not prepare the beginning of personality formation: it is that

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beginning. If we accept a simple image, that of building a house, the temptation is to say that the foundation prepares the house. A different interpretation is proposed here: the foundation is not the house's blueprint; it is the house itself rising. Every experience in nursery care and kindergarten already forms part of the structure of the person the child will become, and cannot be postponed or recovered later with the same effect.

This thesis has a legal counterpart. The Basic Law of the Education and Teaching System (Law No. 17/16 of 7 October), as amended by Law No. 32/20 of 12 August, organises the system into six subsystems and four education levels, and defines the Preschool Education Subsystem as “the foundation of education” (Angola, 2020, art. 21). This subsystem comprises two stages, nursery care and kindergartens (including community children's centres), and has its own typology of institutions. At the same time, the same legislation allows the Initiation Class, intended for children aged 5 to 6, to be taught in primary schools (art. 23(2)). In practice, this possibility has often reduced the local presence of early childhood education to a single class, integrated into a school building and a school logic that are not its own.

This situation motivates the present study. Its guiding question is: to what extent does the Angolan legal framework recognise early childhood education as an autonomous subsystem, and how should the integration of the Initiation Class into primary schools be interpreted in light of that recognition? The general aim is to analyse the coherence between the pedagogical foundations of early childhood education, its legal status and the actual organisation of provision. Specifically, it seeks to (i) establish the theoretical basis for the intrinsic value of early childhood education; (ii) identify the constitutional, international and statutory provisions supporting its autonomy; (iii) examine the tension between art. 23(2) and the subsystem's remaining rules; and (iv) formulate proposals for educator training and improvements to legislation.

The study is justified by three reasons. First, research on human development converges on the view that the earliest years are decisive and that inequalities arising then tend to persist. Second, Angola has a very young population, making the quality of early childhood provision a matter of national interest. Third, discussion of the location of the Initiation Class rarely rests on the legal text and its rigorous interpretation, encouraging both imprecise defences and imprecise criticisms. The intended contribution is therefore also to distinguish what the law says from what is attributed to it.

The article is organised into ten parts. Following this introduction, the methodology is described; the third part presents the theoretical foundations; the fourth, the international,

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African and constitutional framework; the fifth analyses the rules established by Law No. 32/20 for the Preschool Education Subsystem; the sixth examines the tension surrounding the Initiation Class; the seventh discusses implications for curriculum, inclusion and teacher training; the eighth formulates proposals; the ninth identifies limitations and a research agenda; and the tenth presents the conclusions.

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1. Beyond the blank slate

The image of the child as a "blank slate", associated with Locke's empiricist tradition (1690), sustained for centuries a conception of childhood as a time of waiting. If the newborn mind is a blank page, the adult's role is to inscribe on it whatever is considered necessary, and school, with its formal curriculum, is the quintessential place for that inscription. This logic implies that everything preceding school is, at best, preparation.

The knowledge accumulated throughout the twentieth century made this image untenable. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) showed that children actively construct their frameworks of understanding through acting on objects and interacting with the environment, passing through qualitatively distinctive forms of thought rather than incomplete versions of adult thinking. Vygotsky (1978) added that this construction is socially and culturally mediated: development occurs through interaction, language and cultural tools, and play creates a space in which children rehearse abilities they have not yet mastered in everyday life. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, central to this author, clarifies that the most meaningful learning occurs between what children can do alone and what they can do with support from someone more experienced.

These contributions have a consequence for the organisation of education: if children are active subjects from an early age, early childhood education cannot be conceived as a mere antechamber to something else. It can and should prepare children for school, but that is one of its consequences, rather than its reason for being.

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2.2. The foundation and the house

The construction metaphor helps make the difference visible. In the traditional interpretation, the foundation is the part of the work undertaken before the house proper: necessary preparatory work that acquires meaning only when the walls and roof rise. In this image, a child in early childhood education would be a child “under construction”, whose value lies in what comes afterwards.

The interpretation defended here is different. The foundation is not the house's blueprint; it is the house itself rising. What happens in early childhood is not a rehearsal for future life, but life, with its own fullness, which simultaneously structures everything that follows. A four-year-old learning to wait their turn, care for a plant, express feelings and be heard is not training to be a person; they are being a person, in a way that will leave lasting marks on their identity.

This interpretation has three corollaries. The first is recognition of the intrinsic value of children's present lives: the quality of early childhood education is also measured by the well-being, participation and development it provides today, rather than solely by the performance it prepares for tomorrow. The second concerns continuity, rather than rupture, between childhood and schooling: transition to primary education should be carefully coordinated, without erasing the pedagogical specificity of what precedes it. The third is institutional: if early childhood education is the initial construction of personality, it requires institutions, spaces, professionals and pedagogical guidance commensurate with that responsibility.

It is important to avoid a misunderstanding. Stating that early childhood education is not mere preparation does not mean denying that it prepares children for school. The literature consistently indicates that children attending high-quality early childhood education tend to enter primary education better equipped. What is rejected is reducing its purpose to that effect.

2.3. Context, community and local knowledge

Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective (1979) locates children's development within nested, interdependent systems: family, educational institution, community, culture and public policies influence it at different, interacting levels. In Angola, this means that the quality of early childhood education depends not only on the activity room, but also on the family, territorial and institutional conditions in which children live. In reconstructing the historical trajectory of early childhood educational provision in the country, Gando & Gando (2023)

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highlight precisely the persistent gaps in preschool educator training and the structure of provision.

Freire (1996) adds an ethical dimension: teaching requires respect for learners' knowledge, dialogue and recognition of every child as a subject. In connection with this idea, Santos and Meneses (2009) propose an ecology of knowledges that values dialogue between scientific and community knowledge. In Angola, where communities hold their own knowledge about land, water, plants, stories and forms of care, early childhood education rooted in its environment is inherently more inclusive and culturally meaningful. This idea will be revisited in the curriculum discussion.

2.4. What do we know about the importance of the early years?

Research and scientific literature unequivocally show that the first years of life are decisive for children's subsequent development. Experiences and relationships established in early childhood shape the architecture of the developing brain, decisively influencing health, learning and behaviour throughout the life course (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

From this perspective, the importance attributed to this stage has extensive support in developmental psychology and pedagogy. Regarding early cognitive and intellectual development, Bloom (1977) demonstrated that approximately half of human intelligence development is consolidated by age two, and around two-thirds by age four. Complementarily, Zinga (2016) notes that about 50% of the intellectual resources accumulated by an individual by age seventeen are already established at age four, while the next 30% are acquired between ages four and eight.

Regarding holistic development and personality, children's faculties develop rapidly before age six. Scientific evidence emphasises that the first five years of life are critical both for developing logical abilities, reasoning, problem-solving and language skills and for building emotional balance and the capacity for socialisation (Dieuzeide, cited in Zinga, 2016).

Along complementary lines, Heckman's economic analysis (2006) concludes that returns on investment in human capital are greater the earlier it is made, showing that disadvantages accumulated in childhood become substantially harder and more expensive to address at later stages. Although a significant proportion of these classic international studies were conducted in other contexts, their underlying message aligns closely with Angolan

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national findings concerning gaps in provision and requirements for educator training (Gando & Gando, 2023).

2.5. Early childhood pedagogy and the risk of “primary-schoolisation”

Early childhood education has its own pedagogy. It rests on play, exploration, care routines, oral language and affectionate relationships with adults and peers, and inseparably connects caring and educating. In a case study of play in an Angolan preschool context, Candanda et al. (2026) show how playful practices can bring together contemporary pedagogy and local cultural traditions.

The risk arising from integrating early childhood education into structures designed for another level can be conceptually described as “primary-schoolisation”: adopting a primary-school logic in early childhood education, with rigid timetables, division into subjects, emphasis on copying and early formal assessment, and spaces and furniture designed for older children. Discussing preschool and primary curricula, Tati, Tchissende, Leite and Fernandes (2025) identify tensions between the formal curriculum and the actual conditions for implementing it in schools, making this risk plausible, although its extent requires empirical verification.

3. International, African and constitutional framework

3.1. Children's rights and early childhood education

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) recognises the right to education (art. 28), defines education's purpose as developing children's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential (art. 29(1)(a)), and enshrines the right to rest, leisure and play (art. 31). Reading these provisions together directly supports the thesis defended here: education at any age aims at children's full development, rather than merely preparing them for subsequent stages.

In General Comment No. 7 (2005), the Committee on the Rights of the Child defined early childhood as the period from birth to age eight and stressed that young children are rights holders who must be approached holistically, including their right to quality education and care services. In General Comment No. 17 (2013), the same Committee elaborated the right to rest, leisure, play and recreational activities, which applies particularly to younger children. The

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African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), in turn, enshrines the right to education in art. 11, directed towards developing children's personality, talents and abilities.

At the global level, Sustainable Development Goal 4, target 4.2, commits States to ensuring that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education (UN, 2015). The final wording of this target illustrates the dual character of international discourse: preschool education is presented as both a right and preparation, and this duality must be managed without reducing either dimension to the other.

3.2. The Constitution of the Republic of Angola

The Constitution enshrines children's rights as fundamental rights. Article 35(6) establishes that protecting children's rights, particularly their integral and harmonious education, health protection, and living and educational conditions, is an absolute priority for the family, State and society. Article 80, devoted to childhood, recognises children's right to special attention from the family, society and State, which must cooperate to ensure comprehensive protection against abandonment, discrimination, oppression, exploitation and abuse of authority.

The expression “integral and harmonious education” is particularly relevant. It precludes a purely instrumental reading of early childhood education, because what is protected as an absolute priority is children's holistic development, beginning at the very stage when that development starts. This foundation is complemented by the State's fundamental tasks concerning education and sustainable development (art. 21) and the right to a healthy environment (art. 39), which underpin, as argued in another study, the connection between early childhood education, sustainability and ecological citizenship.

3.3. Child protection and early childhood policy

Law No. 25/12 of 22 August, which elaborates children's rights as defined in the Constitution, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter, provides that the family, community, society and State must ensure, as an absolute priority, the realisation of children's rights (art. 2). More recently, Presidential Decree No. 107/24 of 30 April approved the national early childhood policy, which recognises children's challenging circumstances at

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this stage and includes free access to public nurseries and kindergartens among its proposed measures.

This last point is important to the argument: at the public-policy level, the State itself refers to public nurseries and kindergartens as institutions to be guaranteed, rather than only to classes integrated into other schools. The policy instrument thus converges with the Basic Law's typology of institutions, which will be analysed below.

4. Law No. 32/20 and the Preschool Education Subsystem

4.1. The subsystem's place in the education and teaching system

The Basic Law, in the version republished through Law No. 32/20, defines the Education and Teaching System as unified, consisting of six education subsystems and four education levels (art. 17(1)). Preschool Education appears simultaneously as the first subsystem (art. 17(2)(a)) and the first education level (art. 17(3)(a)), alongside primary, secondary and higher education. This dual classification has legal significance: one education level is not a complement to another, and a subsystem is not a class but an organised set of structures, modalities and institutions, in accordance with the definition of system in art. 2(2).

In stating the principle of integrality, art. 7 reinforces this interpretation by requiring permanent horizontal and vertical coordination of education subsystems, levels and modalities. Coordination presupposes distinct parts connected to one another. If one part disappears, absorbed by the next, what remains is no longer coordination but undifferentiated continuity.

4.2. Definition and purposes of the subsystem

Article 21 defines the Preschool Education Subsystem as follows: it is “the foundation of education, caring for early childhood at a stage of life when conditioning and psychomotor development activities should take place”. Article 22 establishes three general objectives: to stimulate children's intellectual, physical, moral, aesthetic and emotional development, ensuring a healthy environment to facilitate entry into the General Education Subsystem (point a); to enable children's better integration and participation through observation and understanding of their natural, social and cultural surroundings (point b); and to develop

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expression, communication and creative imagination, and stimulate curiosity and play (point c).

Analysis of these two articles permits three observations. First, classification as the foundation of education points to a foundational function, the meaning this study assigns to the foundation metaphor. Second, the objectives have clearly distinctive pedagogical content, centred on holistic development, environment, participation, expression and play, rather than anticipating school content. Third, it must honestly be acknowledged that art. 22(a) includes facilitating entry into general education. The law therefore recognises the preparatory dimension, but as part of a broader objective that begins by stimulating children's development and ensuring a healthy environment, rather than as an exclusive purpose. Discourse reducing early childhood education to school preparation thus offers a partial reading of the law.

4.3. Structure: from cycles to stages

Article 23(1), as amended by Law No. 32/20, provides that Preschool Education comprises two stages: nursery care, from 3 months to 3 years of age; and kindergartens and community children's centres or community education centres, for children aged 3 to 5 in the enrolment year, including the Initiation Class for ages 5 to 6.

It is also worth noting that describing the preschool subsystem as comprising two cycles (nursery and kindergarten) corresponds to the earlier arrangements preceding Law No. 17/16, under which preschool education had two cycles. In its original wording, Law No. 17/16 provided for three stages, with the Initiation Class as an autonomous stage. Law No. 32/20 reorganised them into two stages, incorporating the Initiation Class into the second. This development matters because it shows that the Initiation Class's autonomy was diminished in 2020 while the subsystem's autonomy was reaffirmed.

4.4. Typology and designation of institutions

The preamble to the 2020 legislation (Basic Law) justified it by the need to clarify the typology and designation of institutions in each education subsystem. Regarding preschool education, art. 58(1) establishes nurseries and kindergartens as institution types, the latter grouped with community children's centres and community education centres. Article 59(1)(b) designates second-stage institutions as kindergartens, community children's centres or community education centres for children aged 3 to 5 in the enrolment year. By contrast, the

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original wording of art. 58 provided that preschool institutions were “Children's Centres!”, a single designation that Law No. 32/20 differentiated.

It follows that the law provides for a dedicated network of early childhood institutions, with their own typological identity and designations. The 2020 legislature took care to distinguish nurseries and kindergartens, rather than dissolve them into other structures. This is the strongest textual basis for asserting that the subsystem has, in principle, institutions of its own.

4.5. Compulsory attendance, free provision and supervision

Under art. 12(2), compulsory education encompasses the Initiation Class, primary education and the first cycle of secondary education. Article 11(3), in turn, imposes on the State the duty to guarantee and promote the conditions necessary for free attendance of the Initiation Class and the first cycle of secondary education, as well as school transport, school health and school snacks, “currently called school feeding”, in public institutions. Within the preschool subsystem, compulsory attendance and free provision are therefore concentrated in the Initiation Class. The two preceding stages (nursery care and kindergarten for ages 3 to 5) are neither legally compulsory nor guaranteed free provision by the Basic Law itself.

This asymmetry helps explain an observable phenomenon: since the Initiation Class is the part of the subsystem the State most firmly undertakes to guarantee, and primary schools are the public structure most widely distributed across the territory, it is natural for the Initiation Class in primary schools to become the visible face of early childhood education. However, the consequence is that provision for ages 0 to 5 depends on limited public initiatives or on private or community initiatives, accentuating inequalities of access.

4.6. Curriculum and educator training

Under Law No. 32/20, curricula for preschool, primary and secondary education are national and compulsory, must foster effective dialogue between local and universal knowledge, and assign 20% of curricular content to local responsibility (art. 105(1)-(2)). Regarding training, the Teacher Training Subsystem (arts. 43-51) prepares teachers and other education personnel for all subsystems. Secondary teacher education qualifies graduates to teach in preschool education (arts. 46 and 48(b)), while higher teacher education qualifies them for teaching and teaching-support activities at all levels and in all subsystems (arts. 49-51).

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Article 124-A establishes that secondary teacher education is progressively replaced by higher teacher education, giving higher pedagogical schools a greater role in training future early childhood educators.

The following table summarises the provisions most relevant to this article's argument.

Table No. 1 – Summary of the articles relevant to the research

Article	Essential content	Relevance to the thesis
Art. 17	Six subsystems and four levels; Preschool Education is a subsystem and a level	Structural autonomy
Art. 21	Preschool Education Subsystem as the foundation of education	Foundational function
Art. 22	Purposes: holistic development, healthy environment, surroundings, play; facilitate entry into general education	Distinctive purpose and preparatory dimension
Art. 23(1)	Two stages: nursery care and kindergarten/community children's centres/community education centres, the latter including the Initiation Class	Subsystem structure
Art. 23(2)	The Initiation Class may also be taught in primary schools	Permission generating the tension
Arts. 58 and 59	Typology and designation: nurseries, kindergartens, community children's centres/community education centres	Dedicated institutional network
Arts. 11(3) and 12(2)	Free provision to be promoted and compulsory attendance of the Initiation Class	Concentration of the State guarantee

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Article	**Essential content**	**Relevance to the thesis**
Art. 105	National curriculum with 20% local responsibility	Local knowledge
Arts. 43-51 and 124-A	Teacher training; transition to higher teacher education	Role of higher pedagogical schools

5. The Initiation Class and systemic tension

5.1. What the law says: literal analysis

The starting point must be Law No. 17/16 of 7 October, amended by Law No. 32/20 of 21 October, whose art. 23(2) provides that the Initiation Class may also be taught in primary schools to children aged 5 to 6 in the enrolment year. Three elements deserve attention here.

First, the provision is permissive rather than mandatory: it uses the verb “may”. The law does not require the Initiation Class to operate in primary schools; it merely permits it. Second, the adverb “also” indicates a modality alternative to another, rather than the normal modality. The main modality, described in paragraph 1(b), places the Initiation Class within the stage comprising kindergartens and community centres. Third, even when taught in a primary school, the Initiation Class does not change its legal nature: it remains part of Preschool Education, rather than primary education, which begins only at age 6 (art. 27(2)).

A clarification necessary for accuracy follows. It is incorrect to claim that integrating the Initiation Class into primary schools contradicts the letter of the law: the law expressly provides for it. What can be maintained, and what this article argues, is that such integration, when it becomes the sole rule, distorts the subsystem's overall framework. The criticism must therefore be systematic and teleological, rather than merely literal.

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5.2. Systematic analysis: arguments supporting the criticism

Four arguments support this criticism. The first concerns structural coherence. If Preschool Education is an education level and a subsystem (art. 17), with two stages covering ages 3 months to 6 years, public provision effectively reduced to a single one-year class leaves the essential part of the level unserved. A subsystem cannot be reduced to a class without losing its meaning, just as secondary education could not be reduced to a single grade without ceasing to be secondary education.

The second concerns practical effect. Articles 58 and 59 classify and designate institutions (nurseries, kindergartens, community children's centres and community education centres) that make sense only if they exist. An interpretation rendering this typology a dead letter, because children's only contact with the subsystem is a classroom in a primary school, contradicts the hermeneutic principle that provisions should be interpreted to produce effects.

The third concerns integrality and coordination (art. 7). Vertical coordination between Preschool Education and primary education presupposes that both exist as distinct realities. When the Initiation Class operates inside a primary school, sharing a building, timetables, management and sometimes teachers, the boundary between the two levels blurs, and coordination becomes absorption.

The fourth concerns the distribution of responsibilities. Article 13(2) provides that the initiative for developing education is a State responsibility, complemented by the entrepreneurial initiative of private or public-private entities. Creating a preschool network is therefore not limited to existing primary schools, and the law institutionally recognises three modes of provision: public, public-private and private.

5.3. Teleological analysis

Under arts. 21 and 22, the Preschool Education Subsystem aims at children's holistic development in a healthy environment, their participation in natural, social and cultural surroundings, and the stimulation of expression, imagination and play. Primary education has, as a leading specific objective, the development of learning capacity, using as its basic means mastery of reading, writing, arithmetic and the foundations of science and technology (art. 29(a)). These purposes are complementary but distinct.

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The hypothesis formulated here is that locating the Initiation Class in a primary school without safeguards tends to import the logic of art. 29: emphasis on formal literacy, subjects and early assessment at the expense of play and environmental exploration. This is a hypothesis that documentary analysis cannot demonstrate and that empirical research must test. Nevertheless, it is consistent with tensions between formal curriculum and actual implementation conditions identified in Angolan literature (Tati et al., 2025).

5.4. Counterarguments and response

An honest analysis requires considering reasons favouring the current solution. At least three deserve attention.

The first concerns realism and costs. In an extensive country with limited resources and a sparse nursery and kindergarten network, using existing primary-school infrastructure is the quickest way to expand access for children aged 5 to 6, precisely the age group for which the law establishes compulsory and free attendance. The second concerns ease of transition: children attending the Initiation Class at the school where they will enter Grade 1 already know the space, adults and peers, which may soften the disruption. The third concerns adaptation to low-population-density contexts, particularly rural ones, where establishing an autonomous institution may not be feasible in the short term.

These arguments carry weight but do not overturn the conclusion. At most, they justify reading art. 23(2) as a supplementary, transitional solution appropriate where a dedicated institution neither exists nor is feasible, rather than as a general organisational model. Supporting this restrictive interpretation are the optional, alternative character of the provision, the principle that exceptions are interpreted restrictively, and the constitutional absolute priority accorded to children's holistic education (Constitution, art. 35(6)). Transition can occur without merger: coordination between levels is a pedagogical task involving joint planning, visits and communication with families, and does not require early childhood education to lose its own space.

Where the Initiation Class temporarily operates in a primary school, coherence with the subsystem requires minimum conditions: a dedicated, suitable and safe space with outdoor access; age-appropriate furniture and materials; educators specifically trained in early childhood education; planning and assessment based on preschool pedagogy rather than Grade 1 targets; schedules and routines compatible with children's needs; and involvement of families

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and the community. These conditions derive from arts. 21 and 22, art. 105 and the training framework in arts. 46 and 48, and can be implemented through regulations without amending the law.

6. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-interpretative approach based on bibliographic and documentary research, with a legal-hermeneutic analytical component. This choice is justified by the nature of the question: the aim is not to find statistical regularities but to understand the meaning and coherence of rules and concepts. The work belongs to the same line of research on preschool education, teacher training and inclusion in Angola being developed at the Higher Pedagogical School of Cuanza Norte.

The corpus brings together four groups of sources. The first comprises domestic law: the Constitution of the Republic of Angola (2010), Law No. 17/16 of 7 October, Law No. 32/20 of 12 August, Law No. 25/12 of 22 August on child protection and holistic development, and Presidential Decree No. 107/24 of 30 April approving the national early childhood policy. The second group brings together international and African instruments concerning children's rights and education. The third comprises foundational pedagogical and psychological literature. The fourth consists of recent Angolan studies on early childhood education, teacher training, inclusion and environmental education. Quotations from the Basic Law's provisions were checked against the version republished as an annex to Law No. 32/20 in the Diário da República, Series I, No. 123, of 12 August 2020.

The rules were interpreted using the classical canons of legal hermeneutics: the literal element (what the text says), the systematic element (how the text connects with the legislation's other provisions and the legal order) and the teleological element (the purposes the rule seeks to realise). The material was read according to Bardin's principles of content analysis, based on five categories: (i) nature of the subsystem; (ii) structure and stages; (iii) typology and designation of institutions; (iv) purposes and pedagogical orientation; and (v) educator training.

Two limitations should be noted. First, the study collects no empirical data on the actual operation of the Initiation Class in schools; statements about practice must therefore be read as hypotheses to be tested later. Second, the subsystem's specific regulatory instruments (organisation, operation, curriculum and licensing rules) were not all analysed exhaustively and should be addressed in future work.

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7. Discussion

7.1. Identity and autonomy

The location of the Initiation Class is not merely an administrative issue; it is a question of identity. When a subsystem is represented in communities' everyday lives by a class inside another school, the implicit message is that early childhood education is an extension of primary education, a kind of year zero. This message shapes parents', administrators' and decision-makers' expectations about what should be done with five-year-olds, reinforcing the idea that the stage's value lies in its usefulness for school. The thesis of the foundation as a house under construction proposes the reverse: early childhood education has intrinsic value and should have its own place.

7.2. Educator training

Educator training is where rules become practice. The Teacher Training Subsystem aims to train teachers with solid scientific, pedagogical, methodological, linguistic, cultural, technical and human knowledge (art. 44(b)), and higher teacher education qualifies graduates to teach at all levels (art. 49). If early childhood education is a subsystem with its own pedagogy, initial training must cover not only general didactic content but also child development from ages 0 to 6, the pedagogy of play, work with families and communities, observation and documentation, inclusive education and environmental education. Recent Angolan studies indeed emphasise the need to strengthen continuing teacher training and connect it with local contexts (Panzo, Buza & Canga, 2016; Namuele et al., 2026). Discussing higher education, Kajibanga (2000) recalls that training teachers involves more than awarding diplomas: it means preparing socially responsible professionals, which for early childhood educators entails defending children's right to an education of their own.

The transition from secondary to higher teacher education provided for in art. 124-A offers higher pedagogical schools, such as Cuanza Norte's, an opportunity to strengthen early childhood education programmes, particularly training for work in both stages and the Initiation Class while preserving the subsystem's distinctive pedagogical identity.

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7.3. Curriculum, local knowledge and the environment

By assigning 20% of curricular content to local responsibility, art. 105(2) creates space for the ecology of knowledges (Santos & Meneses, 2009) and dialogue between school and community knowledge. In early childhood education, this space can be filled with stories, songs, traditional games, vegetable gardens, local plants and community forms of care. Article 2(1) of the Basic Law includes environmental protection among the challenges education should prepare learners to address, while art. 22(b) makes understanding the natural, social and cultural environment one of the subsystem's specific objectives. A dedicated institution with outdoor space and community links is better placed to realise these objectives than an isolated classroom in a school building designed for a different age group. Ecological citizenship, as analysed in an earlier study, finds an institutional foundation here.

7.4. Inclusion and equity

The Basic Law enshrines the universality of the system, including social inclusion, equal opportunities and prohibition of discrimination (art. 9), and establishes Special Education as a modality across all subsystems (art. 83). Chambal (2019) shows that implementing inclusive policies in Angola depends on teacher capacity-building, and that professionals with differing training generate unequal responses. In early childhood, identifying specific educational needs and intervening promptly are especially important, and are more feasible in an institution with a specialist team connected to health and social services than in an isolated class. The community children's centres and community education centres provided for in arts. 23, 58 and 59 therefore constitute a flexible model potentially suited to rural and peri-urban areas, provided they have trained professionals and technical support.

8. Proposals

The following proposals distinguish what can be done under current law (de lege lata) from what would require legislative amendment (de lege ferenda).

Under the current legal framework:

1. Adopt, through regulatory guidance, a restrictive interpretation of art. 23(2), defining it as a supplementary, transitional solution applicable where nurseries or kindergartens do not

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exist and are not feasible, rather than as a general organisational model for the Initiation Class.

2. Approve minimum standards for Initiation Classes operating in primary schools concerning dedicated space, suitable furniture and materials, outdoor areas, child-to-educator ratios, schedules, assessment and coordination with Grade 1, based on arts. 21, 22 and 105.
3. Define a phased plan to expand the network of nurseries, kindergartens, community children's centres and community education centres, with provincial targets and priority for peri-urban and rural communities, mobilising the public, public-private and private provision permitted by art. 13.
4. Strengthen initial and continuing training of early childhood educators in higher pedagogical schools, emphasising the pedagogy of play, inclusive education, environmental education and collaboration with families and communities.
5. Create indicators and data-collection systems specifically for Preschool Education, disaggregated by stage, institution type, territory and children's circumstances, making visible what is currently often aggregated with primary education.
6. Coordinate the education sector's action with social services, health and environmental sectors, in line with the national early childhood policy.

With a view to legislative revision:

7. Revise art. 23(2) to subject it to a transitional regime with a deadline and conditions, or reserve its application for duly justified cases.
8. Approve or update the subsystem's specific regulations, particularly concerning institutions' organisation and operation, educators' professional profiles and quality standards.
9. Provide a specific budget allocation for Preschool Education and study the progressive extension of free provision to children aged 3 to 5 in public institutions, pursuant to the commitment already made in the early childhood policy.

9. Limitations and research agenda

The study is documentary and hermeneutic, and its conclusions must be read within those limits. There are no data quantifying how many Initiation Classes operate in primary schools, under what conditions, with what personnel or with what results, nor comparative data on children attending autonomous preschool institutions and those attending only the Initiation Class. Nor were the subsystem's regulatory instruments analysed exhaustively.

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The proposed research agenda includes mapping preschool institutions and Initiation Classes in Cuanza Norte and other provinces; interviews with trainers, final-year students and practising educators; observation of practices in Initiation Classes integrated into primary schools and in autonomous kindergartens; and studies of the transition to Grade 1. This phase, already envisaged within the broader project encompassing this work, will allow the hypotheses formulated here to be tested, particularly the “primary-schoolisation” of the Initiation Class.

10. Conclusion

The article sought to show that early childhood education is neither a mere pastime nor simply an antechamber to school, but the beginning of the construction of children's personality. Returning to its guiding metaphor, the foundation is not the house's blueprint: it is the house itself rising. The contributions of Vygotsky, Piaget, Bronfenbrenner and Freire, evidence on the importance of the early years, and international and constitutional child-protection instruments converge on the view that this phase has intrinsic value and requires commensurate institutions and professionals.

Analysis of Law No. 32/20 confirms that the Angolan legislature recognised this status: Preschool Education is a subsystem and an education level, is “the foundation of education”, comprises two stages and has its own typology of institutions. At the same time, art. 23(2) allows the Initiation Class to be taught in primary schools. This possibility is not unlawful, but when turned into the rule it weakens the subsystem's coherence, concentrates in the Initiation Class what the law envisaged for a broader network, and risks importing primary-school logic into early childhood education.

The solution is not to deny the usefulness of integration in specific contexts, but to restore its place as a transitional solution surrounded by safeguards while expanding the network of nurseries, kindergartens and community centres and strengthening educator training. A subsystem cannot be reduced to a class, nor childhood to a year of sharing. Ensuring children, from their earliest years, an education that recognises them as subjects, values their knowledge, cares for their environment and fully includes them is a task belonging to the State, family, community and training institutions, including higher pedagogical schools.

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