

El Principio Del Interés Superior Del Niño En La Educación Inicial Y Sus Implicaciones Pedagógicas Y Éticas En La Práctica Docente

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Abstract

The principle of the best interests of the child constitutes a fundamental guideline in the protection of children's rights and has direct implications for educational practice, particularly in early childhood education. This study aims to analyze the principle of the best interests of the child in Ecuadorian early childhood education and its pedagogical and ethical implications for teaching practice. A qualitative approach was adopted, using a descriptive–interpretive and exploratory design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 early childhood teachers, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, allowing the identification of emerging categories related to teachers' understandings, practices, and ethical dilemmas. The findings reveal that the principle of the best interests of the child is present in teaching practice mainly in an implicit manner, expressed through care-oriented actions and concern for children's emotional well-being. However, its application is not always grounded in an explicit rights-based framework, generating tensions between institutional demands and pedagogical decisions. The study highlights the role of teachers as moral agents and direct guarantors of children's rights and emphasizes the need to strengthen ethical and rights-based training in early childhood education. These findings contribute to the discussion on educational ethics and children's rights by providing contextualized evidence from the Ecuadorian educational system.

Keywords: *Best Interests of the Child, Early Childhood Education, Educational Ethics, Teachers' Practice, Rights-Based Approach.*

Introduction

Early childhood education constitutes a decisive stage of human development, during which the cognitive, emotional, social, and ethical foundations are established, significantly influencing children's well-being and life trajectories. Scientific evidence has demonstrated that early educational experiences directly affect holistic development, emotional self-regulation, identity formation, and social skills, shaping a sensitive period that requires relevant, respectful, and high-quality pedagogical interventions (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2020; UNESCO, 2022). In this sense, early childhood education transcends its role as mere preparation for formal schooling and is consolidated as a fundamental space for the guarantee of rights and the promotion of full human development.

In the Ecuadorian context, early childhood education has been recognized as a priority level within the national education system, aimed at the comprehensive development of early childhood and the effective exercise of children's rights. The Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, the Code of Childhood and Adolescence, and current educational regulations establish that the State, the family, and society share the responsibility of ensuring an education that promotes children's well-being, dignity, and full development from their earliest years. Nevertheless, the materialization of these normative principles in everyday pedagogical practice continues to face structural, training-related, and ethical challenges in early childhood education institutions across the country.

From this perspective, a rights-based approach to early childhood emerges as an essential framework for understanding early childhood education not merely as an educational service, but as a

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fundamental human right. This approach recognizes children as rights-holders, capable of participating, expressing opinions, and being heard, and requires that pedagogical practices be oriented toward the protection, promotion, and effective realization of these rights. In Ecuador, this paradigm coexists with educational practices that, in some cases, still respond to traditional, adult-centered, or normative approaches, generating tensions between legal discourse and classroom realities.

Within this scenario, the principle of the best interests of the child acquires central relevance as a normative and ethical axis guiding decisions that affect children. This principle, recognized by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and incorporated into the Ecuadorian legal framework, establishes that any decision related to children must prioritize their overall well-being and full development. In the educational field, particularly in early childhood education, this principle is reflected in everyday pedagogical decisions related to curriculum planning, assessment, school coexistence, attention to diversity, and emotional care. However, its effective application in teaching practice is not always evident or systematic.

Despite the existence of a solid legal framework for the protection of children's rights, a significant gap persists between current regulations and everyday teaching practice in Ecuadorian early childhood education. Factors such as administrative overload, insufficient in-service training in rights-based approaches, institutional conditions, and systemic pressures influence pedagogical decisions that do not always prioritize the best interests of the child. This gap gives rise to relevant ethical dilemmas for teachers, who must reconcile institutional demands with their professional and moral responsibility as guarantors of children's rights.

From a scientific and social perspective, it becomes necessary to analyze how the principle of the best interests of the child is understood and incorporated into teaching practice in Ecuadorian early childhood education, as well as to identify its pedagogical and ethical implications. Although international literature has addressed rights-based approaches to childhood, studies that systematically articulate legal, pedagogical, and ethical components within specific educational contexts such as Ecuador remain limited. In this regard, the present study seeks to contribute to academic debate and to the improvement of educational practices by offering a contextualized analysis that dialogues with international perspectives and evidence.

In line with the above, the general objective of this article is to analyze the principle of the best interests of the child in Ecuadorian early childhood education and its pedagogical and ethical implications for teaching practice. Complementarily, the specific objectives are: (a) to examine the conceptual and normative foundations of the principle of the best interests of the child in the Ecuadorian educational context; (b) to identify the ethical implications of this principle in early childhood teaching practice; and (c) to reflect on the main pedagogical challenges faced by teachers in ensuring the best interests of the child in their everyday professional practice.

The article is structured as follows: first, a theoretical framework is presented that addresses early childhood education from a rights-based approach, the principle of the best interests of the child, and the ethical dimension of teaching practice. Subsequently, the methodology used in the study is described. Next, the results are presented and discussed in light of the specialized literature. Finally, conclusions are drawn, along with recommendations aimed at strengthening teaching practice and the guarantee of children's rights in Ecuadorian early childhood education.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Early Childhood Education from a Rights-Based Approach (Ecuador)

Conceptualization of Early Childhood Education

In contemporary educational discourse, early childhood education is understood as an intentional and systematic process aimed at supporting holistic development during early childhood, with an emphasis on relevant learning experiences that are emotionally safe and culturally situated. In the Ecuadorian context, this conceptualization is explicitly linked to the notion of holistic development, the recognition of individual learning rhythms, and the protection of children's well-being within a rights-based framework. Recent Ecuadorian educational regulations define Early Childhood Education as a "process of accompaniment to the holistic development" of children aged three to five, encompassing cognitive, affective, psychomotor, social, identity-related, autonomy, and belonging dimensions, with the mandate to "guarantee and respect their rights" and their cultural and linguistic diversity.

This national characterization aligns with the international perspective that emphasizes that Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is not merely a preparatory stage for schooling, but rather a phase with intrinsic value, decisive for the formation of capabilities and life opportunities. The *Global Report on Early Childhood Care and Education* (UNESCO–UNICEF) stresses that “transforming education must start with the youngest children,” linking the educational meaning of this stage to social justice and the right to a strong foundation.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the conceptualization of early childhood education integrates two elements that are central to a rights-based approach. First, **integrality (whole child approach)**: education addresses the developing person as a whole, rather than isolated skills. This entails the provision of safe environments, protective relationships, play, language development, interaction, emotional health, and children’s participation as essential learning conditions. UNICEF’s framework on early childhood development clearly articulates this perspective by stating that “every child has the right to the best start in life.”

Second, **shared responsibility**: early childhood education requires articulation with families, communities, and institutions, as early child development depends on a broader ecosystem of care. In Ecuador, this shared responsibility is reflected both in the intersectoral approach to early childhood and in the requirement for social participation in educational processes. At the level of pedagogical implementation, this is evident in methodological guidelines that promote family involvement and contextualized educational practices.

The *Methodological Guide for Early Childhood and Preparatory Education* issued by the Ministry of Education (2023) reinforces this conceptualization by emphasizing comprehensive attention to children from birth to six years of age and by positioning play as the core pedagogical strategy. The guide states that the curriculum seeks to ensure “comprehensive care in a quality environment” in order to foster physical, cognitive, social, affective, psychomotor, and language development “through play-work as the main strategy.”

This methodological orientation is not a minor didactic detail. From a rights-based perspective, play constitutes a learning medium that safeguards dignity, promotes participation, and counteracts adult-centered practices grounded in obedience or training. In sum, conceptualizing early childhood education from a rights-based approach entails understanding it as a holistic, affective, and context-sensitive process of accompaniment, whose purpose is not to accelerate content acquisition, but to create the conditions that enable children to develop their capabilities, well-being, and agency within a framework of dignity.

Education as a Fundamental Human Right

A rights-based approach rests on a guiding principle: education is a human right and, as such, must be guaranteed by the State under conditions of universality, equality, and non-discrimination. In the Ecuadorian context, this recognition is strongly articulated in current legal instruments referenced and integrated by national educational authorities. A recent ministerial agreement issued by the Ministry of Education (2023) compiles key constitutional provisions, affirming that education is a lifelong right, an inescapable duty of the State, a guarantee of equality and inclusion, and an “indispensable condition for *Buen Vivir*,” while also establishing compulsory provision at the early childhood level.

“The education is a right of people throughout their lives...”

The centrality of the right to education is also reinforced within the global education and development agenda. In particular, the transformation framework promoted after the World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education (Tashkent, 2022) reaffirms that ECCE is essential for realizing the right to education and enabling other social rights, and that public policies and legal frameworks must ensure the availability, accessibility, adaptability, and acceptability of services.

At this point, it is crucial to clarify what “right” means in operational terms for early childhood education. Recent literature and policy frameworks tend to conceptualize the right to education through verifiable conditions such as access, quality, relevance, equity, and protection. The *Global Report on Early Childhood Care and Education* (UNESCO–UNICEF, 2024) argues that the realization of the right to education “must begin with the right to a strong foundation,” that is, with early guarantees of care and learning capable of reducing inequalities that emerge early and persist throughout the life course.

Moreover, education as a right cannot be reduced to enrollment or coverage alone; it requires that educational systems provide learning experiences that do not violate—either through action or

omission—rights related to integrity, non-discrimination, participation, protection from violence, and emotional well-being. In Ecuador, the normative framework cited by the Ministry of Education emphasizes that the State shall adopt measures to guarantee nutrition, health, education, and daily care for children under six years of age “within a framework of comprehensive protection of their rights.”

When this principle is translated into classroom practice, a key implication emerges: if early childhood education is a right, then pedagogical quality is not optional, but rather an obligation derived from that right. The global commitments adopted in Tashkent (2022) explicitly link the right to education with the provision of quality ECCE services, including the recognition of at least one year of free and compulsory pre-primary education as part of the fulfillment of this right.

In summary, education as a fundamental human right, when applied to early childhood education, entails: (a) legal recognition; (b) the guarantee of effective access; (c) the provision of safe, high-quality learning environments; and (d) State and institutional responsibility to prevent rights violations and inequalities from the earliest stages of the life cycle.

Rights-Based Approach in Early Childhood

A rights-based approach to early childhood entails a paradigm shift: it moves away from viewing children as passive “beneficiaries” and recognizes them as rights-holders endowed with dignity, voice, needs, and developing agency. In early childhood education, this perspective is translated into everyday pedagogical decisions, such as how learning environments are organized, how children’s expressions are listened to and validated, how discipline is managed, how diversity is included, how emotional well-being is protected, and how services and support systems are articulated.

At the international level, UNICEF has updated its early childhood development framework in recent years to emphasize that the “best start” integrates nutrition, stimulation, responsive caregiving, early learning, health, and safe environments. These dimensions are explicitly framed as rights that enable full development. In other words, a rights-based approach requires understanding early childhood as a network of interdependent guarantees: learning cannot be separated from being protected, nourished, cared for, listened to, and emotionally safe.

Within the global education policy arena, the UNESCO–UNICEF Global Report (2024) highlights that progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 remains insufficient and that inequalities “start early and persist throughout life.” From a rights-based perspective, this implies that education systems must address gaps at an early stage, rather than consolidating them through fragmented or poorly regulated provision.

In Ecuador, the rights-based approach functions as a cross-cutting orientation not only within the constitutional and legal framework, but also in pedagogical and school coexistence guidelines. For example, the ministerial guide *Education in Values and Rights from Families* (2024) proposes tools for teachers and the educational community to strengthen the exercise of fundamental rights related to harmonious coexistence and well-being, linking values such as respect, tolerance, empathy, and solidarity with rights such as a life free from violence, non-discrimination, and dignity.

What is particularly relevant for early childhood education is that this approach shifts the focus from “behavioral correction” toward the prevention of rights violations, socio-emotional development, and the construction of protective learning environments. This orientation is consistent with the evidence presented in the UNESCO–UNICEF Global Report (2024), which underscores that socio-emotional skills are as foundational as cognitive skills and that play represents a privileged medium for fostering them, although adequate teacher support and training are required for effective implementation.

From an analytical perspective, a rights-based approach to early childhood can be organized around four practical axes adapted to early childhood education:

a) Non-discrimination and genuine inclusion.

This entails identifying barriers—cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, related to disability, gender, or territory—and eliminating them through reasonable accommodations, support mechanisms, and inclusive practices. The UNESCO–UNICEF Global Report (2024) consistently emphasizes that expanding ECCE opportunities and ensuring quality requires overcoming fragmentation and underfunding that reproduce inequality.

b) Protection and care as conditions for learning.

In early childhood, learning is inherently dependent on well-being and safety. UNICEF (2023) explicitly includes protection from toxic stress and the provision of adequate care and protection as determinants of early childhood development.

c) Children's participation and listening.

Although participation must be interpreted in accordance with age and developmental level, a rights-based approach requires recognizing children's voices in classroom decisions, such as the choice of materials, the negotiation of simple rules, emotional expression, and the narration of experiences. This does not imply "total autonomy," but rather pedagogical design that fosters agency while maintaining protection.

d) Pedagogical quality with cultural and territorial relevance.

In Ecuador, this dimension is particularly critical due to the country's cultural and linguistic diversity. The normative definition of early childhood education itself emphasizes respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as for children's rhythms of growth and learning. In practice, this entails contextualized curricula, culturally relevant materials, and intercultural strategies, avoiding the imposition of homogeneous models that render identities invisible.

In summary, a rights-based approach to early childhood requires understanding early childhood education as a space where care and learning are inseparable, ensuring guarantees of inclusion, protection, participation, and quality, and demanding that schools adopt pedagogical and institutional mechanisms capable of translating rights into concrete, everyday experiences.

The Role of Schools and Teachers as Guarantors of Rights

Adopting a rights-based approach inevitably leads to a central question: who guarantees rights in everyday school life? The answer cannot rest solely on legal texts; rights are realized through practices, decisions, resources, and relationships. In early childhood education, schools as institutions and teachers as pedagogical agents function as direct guarantors of rights, as they mediate children's concrete educational experiences.

The UNESCO–UNICEF Global Report (2024) explicitly states that "teachers, along with parents, are key actors in children's early learning," and therefore must be supported in addressing the learning crisis and in ensuring the highest possible quality of early learning opportunities. This assertion is particularly relevant in Ecuador, where tensions between institutional demands, available resources, and diverse contexts—urban and rural settings, intercultural environments, and socioeconomic vulnerability—place teachers in scenarios that require complex decision-making.

Within the Ecuadorian normative framework, the guarantee of rights in early childhood education is articulated as a cross-cutting mandate: the education system must ensure the "full exercise" of children's rights and be guided by the principle of the best interests of the child. This implies that schools do not merely "teach," but also protect, prevent harm, include, and respond when risks or rights violations are identified. Consequently, the teaching profession incorporates an ethical–legal dimension, positioning teachers as frontline actors responsible for operationalizing the best interests of the child through pedagogically sound decisions.

From a global policy perspective, the Tashkent Declaration (2022) links the realization of the right to education to the design of policies and legal frameworks that guarantee the availability, accessibility, adaptability, and acceptability of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). At the school level, these criteria are translated into practical questions:

- **Availability:** Are there sufficient services, resources, and qualified personnel?
- **Accessibility:** Can all children enter and remain in the system without economic, geographic, or social barriers?
- **Adaptability:** Are practices adjusted to cultural and linguistic diversity, disability, and different learning rhythms?
- **Acceptability:** Does the educational experience respect dignity, well-being, and participation, avoiding violence or humiliation?

These questions operationalize the guarantor role of schools and teachers by connecting the language of rights with everyday pedagogical micro-decisions.

In Ecuador, recent pedagogical documents issued by the Ministry of Education reinforce this role in practice. The *Methodological Guide for Early Childhood Education* (2023) emphasizes that teaching work should involve planning, organizing, and implementing activities “together with families,” responding to the “needs, interests, and characteristics” of children’s realities during a “crucial and decisive” stage for holistic development. This perspective positions teachers as architects of learning environments and as mediators between curricular policy and children’s everyday experiences.

However, assuming the role of rights guarantor does not imply that teachers act in isolation. Schools as institutions must provide enabling conditions, including training, pedagogical support, clear protocols, multidisciplinary teams, non-violent school cultures, and articulation with child protection networks. The ministerial guide on *Education in Values and Rights* (2024) reflects this institutional logic by proposing a community-based strategy aimed at fostering discussion and reflection on practices that strengthen values education for the exercise of rights, generating a “multiplier and transformative” effect within the educational community and families.

From an ethical perspective, the guarantor role becomes visible in at least five dimensions of early childhood teaching practice:

1. **Design of safe and protective environments:** spatial organization, care norms, risk prevention, early identification of signs of violence or neglect, and timely referral in accordance with institutional protocols.
2. **Pedagogy of recognition:** practices that validate identity, language, culture, and emotions, avoiding stigmatization and discrimination, in alignment with the national mandate to respect cultural and linguistic diversity.
3. **Non-violent discipline:** formative and restorative approaches that avoid humiliation, degrading punishment, or disproportionate coercion.
4. **Development-centered assessment and monitoring:** observation and accompaniment that prevent reducing children to “results” or comparative metrics that undermine dignity.
5. **Children’s participation:** inclusion of children’s voices in routines and age-appropriate decisions, fostering agency and autonomy.

Taken together, these elements demonstrate that a rights-based approach is not an “additional component,” but rather a criterion that redefines the meaning and quality of early childhood education. As emphasized in the UNESCO–UNICEF Global Report (2024), ensuring the right to education from the earliest stages requires systems and institutions to support teachers, as their work is decisive in guaranteeing early learning opportunities and children’s well-being.

The Principle of the Best Interests of the Child

Legal Origins of the Principle

The principle of the best interests of the child originates in international human rights law and constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of the comprehensive child protection system. Its contemporary formulation is primarily found in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), a binding legal instrument that has guided State legislation and public policies over recent decades. Article 3 of the Convention establishes that “in all actions concerning children [...] the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration,” thereby introducing a guiding criterion for any decision that directly or indirectly affects children.

Although the CRC was adopted in 1989, its interpretation and conceptual development have been continuously updated, particularly through the General Comments of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which have clarified the scope and application of the principle across various domains, including education. In this regard, General Comment No. 14, updated and widely cited in recent literature, defines the best interests of the child as a substantive right, an interpretative legal principle, and a procedural rule, reinforcing its transversal and mandatory character in public and private decision-making processes (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2020).

In the Ecuadorian context, this principle has been explicitly incorporated into the Constitution of the Republic, the Code of Childhood and Adolescence, and current educational regulations. National legislation recognizes that children’s rights prevail over those of other persons and that the best interests of the child must guide public policies, institutional decisions, and professional practices in

areas such as education, health, and social protection. In this way, the principle acquires internal normative force and becomes a binding mandate for educational institutions and teaching personnel.

Recent legal scholarship emphasizes that the incorporation of the best interests of the child into national legal systems reflects a transition from a tutelary model to a comprehensive protection model, in which children cease to be objects of assistance and are instead recognized as full subjects of rights (García & Beloff, 2021). This paradigmatic shift is particularly significant in the educational field, where adult-centered approaches have historically prioritized discipline, standardization, or institutional efficiency over children's well-being.

From this perspective, the legal origins of the principle should not be understood merely as a normative reference, but as the foundation of a structural transformation in how childhood, adult authority, and institutional responsibility for rights protection are conceived.

Definition and Conceptual Scope

The principle of the best interests of the child is defined as a guiding criterion that requires prioritizing children's holistic well-being and full development in any decision that affects them. It is not an abstract or discretionary notion, but rather a legal and ethical concept that must be interpreted through objective, contextual, and developmental elements. Specialized literature consistently emphasizes that the best interests of the child cannot be reduced to a generic formula, but instead requires case-by-case analysis, taking into account age, sociocultural context, family conditions, and each child's specific needs (Lansdown, 2021).

Over the past five years, several studies have underscored the dynamic and relational nature of the best interests principle, highlighting that its content varies according to context and circumstances. From this perspective, the principle does not impose uniform solutions, but rather guides processes of responsible, informed, and ethically grounded deliberation (Peleg, 2022). In educational settings, this characteristic is particularly relevant, as pedagogical decisions are made within complex environments shaped by multiple actors and institutional constraints.

Conceptually, the best interests of the child encompass at least four interdependent dimensions:

- a) physical and emotional well-being;
- b) holistic and progressive development;
- c) protection from risks and rights violations; and

d) participation and consideration of the child's views, in accordance with age and maturity. These dimensions have been incorporated by international organizations such as UNICEF and UNESCO in recent documents that link the best interests principle to educational quality, inclusion, and equity in early childhood (UNICEF, 2021; UNESCO, 2022).

In the Ecuadorian context, the conceptual scope of the principle is broadened by the constitutional recognition of cultural, territorial, and linguistic diversity. This implies that the best interests of the child cannot be interpreted in a homogeneous or decontextualized manner, but must instead account for the specific characteristics of urban, rural, and intercultural educational environments. Consequently, the principle requires a situated interpretation that avoids imposing pedagogical models detached from children's lived realities and community contexts.

In this way, the best interests of the child operates as a criterion of prioritization, compelling institutions and educators to weigh pedagogical and organizational decisions in light of their impact on children's well-being and development, even when this entails questioning established routines, norms, or administrative demands.

Pedagogical Interpretation of the Principle

The pedagogical interpretation of the principle of the best interests of the child constitutes one of the most significant challenges in early childhood education, as it involves translating a legal principle into concrete didactic, relational, and organizational decisions. From the perspective of contemporary pedagogy, this principle is closely associated with child-centered approaches, meaningful learning, emotional education, and the ethics of care.

Several authors argue that pedagogically interpreting the best interests of the child implies recognizing that every educational decision is, in essence, an ethical decision, as it affects children's development, self-esteem, and lived experiences (Noddings, 2020). In early childhood education, such

decisions are reflected in aspects such as the organization of time, the use of play, the management of discipline, developmental assessment, and relationships with families.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the best interests of the child are realized when educational practices:

- respect learning and developmental rhythms;
- promote emotionally safe environments;
- avoid punitive or humiliating practices;
- foster children's participation; and
- prioritize well-being over the mechanical fulfillment of curricular requirements.

Recent literature in early childhood education emphasizes that the principle of the best interests of the child is undermined when decontextualized academic demands are imposed, when play is restricted in favor of early formalized schooling activities, or when children's socio-emotional needs are ignored (Moss, 2021). In this regard, a pedagogy grounded in the best interests of the child requires a critical review of naturalized practices that may be harmful, even when they are institutionally legitimized.

In Ecuador, early childhood curricular guidelines emphasize play, exploration, and interaction as core methodological axes, reflecting a normative intention to align educational practice with the best interests of the child. However, recent studies indicate that the implementation of these approaches depends largely on teacher education, institutional support, and contextual conditions (Paredes & Toapanta, 2023). Consequently, the pedagogical interpretation of the principle is not exhausted in curricular design, but rather demands processes of critical and ethical reflection within everyday teaching practice.

The Best Interests of the Child in Educational Contexts

In educational contexts, the principle of the best interests of the child operates as a cross-cutting criterion for decision-making, particularly in early childhood education, where the dependence and vulnerability inherent to this developmental stage demand a high level of institutional and professional responsibility. Within this domain, the principle manifests across multiple levels: normative, organizational, pedagogical, and relational.

From an institutional perspective, the best interests of the child should guide the development of school coexistence norms, protocols for responding to risk situations, inclusion strategies, and mechanisms for participation within the educational community. Recent research highlights that institutions which explicitly adopt a best-interests approach tend to foster more inclusive, preventive, and child-sensitive school cultures (OECD, 2021).

At the level of teaching practice, the best interests of the child are enacted through seemingly minor everyday decisions, such as whether to allow emotional expression, adapt activities to individual needs, or intervene in peer conflicts. These micro-decisions shape children's actual educational experiences and may contribute either to the protection or the violation of their rights. In this sense, the principle functions as an ethical compass that guides teachers in contexts characterized by uncertainty and complexity.

In the Ecuadorian context, challenges to the effective application of the best interests of the child in early childhood education include administrative overload, sociocultural diversity, insufficient ongoing training in rights-based approaches, and tensions between institutional demands and children's well-being. Recent national literature warns that, without adequate pedagogical and ethical support, the principle risks being reduced to a normative statement with little real impact on classroom practice (Villacis & Herrera, 2022).

In summary, the principle of the best interests of the child in educational contexts should not be understood as an abstract mandate, but rather as an operational criterion that requires coherence between discourse, regulation, and pedagogical practice. Its effective application in early childhood education entails recognizing children as subjects of rights, strengthening the ethical role of teachers, and consolidating schools as spaces of protection, development, and children's dignity.

Ethical Dimension of Teaching Practice in Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education cannot be understood solely from a technical or pedagogical perspective, as it directly involves the lives, well-being, and holistic development of young children during a stage characterized by high vulnerability and dependence. In this sense, teaching practice in early childhood education is inherently permeated by an ethical dimension, given that every pedagogical decision influences children's dignity, progressive autonomy, and the exercise of their rights. From a contemporary perspective, teacher ethics is configured as a structural component of educational professionalism rather than as an accessory or purely individual attribute.

Recent studies converge in emphasizing that ethics in early childhood education acquires particular relevance due to the asymmetry of power between adults and children, as well as the social responsibility borne by teachers as mediators between normative frameworks for rights protection and the everyday realities of classroom life (Campbell, 2021; Noddings, 2020). In the Ecuadorian context, this ethical dimension is further reinforced by the legal mandate to guarantee the best interests of the child, which positions teaching as a morally situated and legally committed practice.

Ethics of Care and Professional Responsibility

One of the most influential approaches for understanding ethics in early childhood education is the ethics of care, developed over recent decades and revitalized in contemporary educational literature as an interpretive framework for teaching practice in childhood contexts. The ethics of care places relationships, empathy, attentiveness to others' needs, and moral responsibility toward those in situations of dependence at its core (Noddings, 2020).

From this perspective, educating in early childhood involves establishing relationships of responsible care, in which teachers recognize children not only as learners, but as developing persons who require protection, emotional security, and sustained accompaniment. As articulated by Noddings (2020), care-based education "recognizes that relationships are the foundation of all meaningful educational experience," underscoring that learning cannot be separated from emotional well-being.

Within Ecuadorian early childhood education, the ethics of care is manifested in practices such as sensitive attention to children's emotions, respect for developmental rhythms, prevention of symbolic or physical violence, and the creation of emotionally safe learning environments. These practices are not merely methodological choices, but concrete expressions of teachers' professional responsibility, understood as the ethical obligation to act in the best interests of the child and to prevent any form of harm or rights violation.

Recent literature indicates that professional responsibility in early childhood education is expanded when a rights-based approach is adopted, as teachers are held accountable not only to pedagogical standards, but also to ethical and legal principles that require prioritizing children's well-being (Osgood & Giugni, 2021). In this regard, the ethics of care is closely aligned with the principle of the best interests of the child, providing an ethical framework through which this principle can be interpreted and applied in everyday educational practice.

Pedagogical Decision-Making from an Ethical Perspective

Pedagogical decision-making in early childhood education constitutes a complex process involving professional judgment, personal values, institutional norms, and normative frameworks. From an ethical perspective, such decisions cannot be reduced to the mechanical application of protocols or curricula; rather, they require reflective deliberation guided by the best interests of the child and respect for children's dignity.

Recent research highlights that early childhood teachers make ethically significant decisions continuously, often implicitly, in situations such as behavior management, activity adaptation, developmental assessment, and communication with families (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2021). Although routine, these decisions have a substantial impact on children's educational experiences and on the development of self-esteem and emerging autonomy.

From this standpoint, ethically grounded pedagogical decision-making entails considering key questions such as: Does this action respect the child's emotional well-being? Does it promote holistic development? Does it recognize the child's voice and context? Does it avoid discriminatory or punitive practices? In Ecuadorian early childhood education, these questions are particularly salient in contexts characterized by cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity, where teachers' decisions must be sensitive to children's environments and lived realities.

Contemporary scholarship warns that when pedagogical decisions are based exclusively on efficiency, control, or administrative compliance, there is a risk of undermining the best interests of the child, even in the absence of explicit intent (Biesta, 2021). Therefore, strengthening teachers' ethical reflection is increasingly framed as a key professional competence capable of guiding pedagogical action in contexts of uncertainty and tension.

Common Ethical Dilemmas in Early Childhood Education

Ethical dilemmas are an inherent component of early childhood teaching practice, particularly when values, interests, or conflicting demands collide. An ethical dilemma arises when a teacher must choose between two or more courses of action, none of which is fully satisfactory from a moral standpoint (Campbell, 2021).

Among the most frequent ethical dilemmas in early childhood education, recent literature identifies the following:

1. **Discipline versus emotional well-being:** decisions related to children's behavior management, where traditional control-based practices may conflict with respectful and non-punitive approaches.
2. **Curriculum versus developmental rhythms:** pressure to meet academic objectives versus the need to respect children's individual timing and developmental processes.
3. **Institutional demands versus the best interests of the child:** situations in which school or administrative rules do not always align with children's well-being.
4. **Relationships with families:** tensions between family expectations and pedagogical criteria grounded in rights-based approaches.

In the Ecuadorian context, these dilemmas are intensified by factors such as workload overload, diverse sociocultural contexts, and insufficient specialized training in professional ethics and rights-based approaches. Recent national studies indicate that many teachers recognize ethical dilemmas, yet lack institutional spaces to analyze them systematically and collectively (Villacís & Herrera, 2022).

From an ethical perspective, addressing these dilemmas does not entail seeking universal solutions, but rather promoting processes of critical reflection, professional dialogue, and decision-making grounded in principles such as the best interests of the child, justice, equity, and care. In this sense, teacher ethics is configured as a reflective and situated practice that requires institutional support and ongoing professional development.

Teachers as Moral Agents and Protectors of Rights

Within the framework of early childhood education and a rights-based approach, teachers are configured as moral agents and protectors of rights, whose work goes beyond the transmission of knowledge to assume an ethical and social function of high responsibility. This conception recognizes that teachers do not operate solely as implementers of educational policies, but as moral subjects who interpret, apply, and, at times, question norms in light of children's well-being.

Recent literature underscores that early childhood teachers play a key role in translating children's rights into practice, as they mediate between normative frameworks and the concrete realities of classroom life (Osgood & Giugni, 2021). In this sense, teachers become strategic actors for ensuring the effective realization of the best interests of the child, particularly in contexts where structural conditions are limited.

In Ecuador, this protective function is supported by educational regulations that recognize teachers as co-responsible for children's holistic development and protection. However, assuming this role requires specific ethical competences, such as the ability to identify rights violations, act in accordance with protection protocols, promote inclusive environments, and enact a pedagogy that respects children's dignity.

From a contemporary ethical perspective, teachers as moral agents do not act through authoritarian imposition, but through reflective responsibility, a commitment to justice, and care for others. This entails developing a professional ethical awareness capable of resisting institutional practices that may be contrary to the best interests of the child and of promoting pedagogical transformations oriented toward rights protection.

In summary, the ethical dimension of early childhood teaching practice constitutes a cross-cutting axis that articulates care, responsibility, decision-making, and rights protection. Recognizing teachers as moral agents and guarantors of the best interests of the child not only dignifies the profession, but also strengthens educational quality and contributes to the construction of more just, humane, and child-respecting educational environments.

Relationship Between the Best Interests of the Child and Pedagogical Practice

The principle of the best interests of the child reaches its full significance when it is translated into concrete pedagogical practices, particularly in early childhood education, where teachers' decisions have direct and immediate effects on children's well-being, development, and educational experiences. In this regard, the relationship between this principle and pedagogical practice should not be understood as an abstract theoretical correspondence, but as an operational link guiding planning, assessment, school coexistence, and everyday classroom interactions.

Recent studies agree that one of the key challenges for education systems lies precisely in operationalizing the best interests of the child, ensuring that it does not remain a normative statement disconnected from pedagogical action (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). In the Ecuadorian context, this challenge is intensified by the country's sociocultural diversity, territorial inequalities, and tensions between official curricular approaches and entrenched school practices. Therefore, examining the relationship between the best interests of the child and pedagogical practice entails analyzing how this principle guides—or should guide—fundamental educational decisions.

Implications for Planning, Assessment, and School Coexistence

Pedagogical planning constitutes a privileged space for applying the principle of the best interests of the child. Planning from this perspective involves designing learning experiences that respond to children's real needs, interests, and contexts, respecting their developmental rhythms and promoting holistic well-being. Recent literature warns that when planning focuses exclusively on standardized objectives or on accelerating school content, there is a risk of undermining the best interests of the child, particularly in early childhood education (Biesta, 2021).

From a rights-based standpoint, planning should prioritize play, exploration, social interaction, and socio-emotional development as core axes of early learning. In this sense, the curriculum ceases to be a list of contents and becomes a flexible framework that guides teaching action according to children's holistic development. In Ecuador, early childhood curricular guidelines explicitly acknowledge this orientation; however, recent studies indicate that effective implementation depends largely on teacher education and institutional support (Paredes & Toapanta, 2023).

Assessment constitutes another critical domain in the relationship between the best interests of the child and pedagogical practice. From an ethical and rights-based approach, assessment in early childhood education involves accompanying developmental processes, observing progress and difficulties, and providing formative feedback, while avoiding comparative, punitive, or stigmatizing practices. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that early assessment based on rigid standards or quantifiable outcomes can generate undue pressure and negatively affect children's self-esteem and motivation (Moss, 2021).

Within this framework, assessing in line with the best interests of the child entails privileging qualitative observation, narrative records, and respectful communication with families, recognizing that child development is dynamic and non-linear. In the Ecuadorian context, this perspective is particularly relevant in order to avoid assessment practices that reproduce social or cultural inequalities.

School coexistence, in turn, represents a central arena in which the best interests of the child are enacted daily. How conflicts are managed, norms are established, and interpersonal relationships are built reflects the institution's ethical orientation. Recent research highlights that restorative and formative approaches to school coexistence contribute to rights protection and to the development of socio-emotional skills in early childhood (OECD, 2021).

From this perspective, school coexistence in early childhood education should be oriented toward the creation of safe, inclusive, and emotionally positive environments, where mistakes and conflicts are understood as learning opportunities rather than reasons for sanction. This implies that teachers act as ethical mediators, capable of balancing institutional norms with the best interests of the child.

Child-Centered Pedagogical Practices

Child-centered pedagogical practices constitute one of the clearest expressions of the principle of the best interests of the child in early childhood education. This approach recognizes children as active protagonists of their learning and promotes methodologies that respect their curiosity, initiative, and capacity to interact with their environment. Recent international literature emphasizes that child-centered pedagogies are closely associated with improved outcomes in well-being, motivation, and holistic development (UNESCO, 2022).

From this perspective, practices such as play-based learning, guided exploration, project-based work, and emotional education align with the best interests of the child by prioritizing meaningful and contextually relevant experiences. By contrast, overly directive or academically driven approaches tend to reduce educational experience to content transmission, limiting children's agency.

In the Ecuadorian context, implementing child-centered practices faces challenges related to pressure for visible outcomes, administrative workload, and the persistence of traditional conceptions of discipline and authority. Nonetheless, recent national research indicates that when teachers adopt child-centered approaches, participation, autonomy, and the emotional climate of the classroom are strengthened (Villacís & Herrera, 2022).

Paraphrasing UNICEF (2021), a pedagogical practice consistent with the best interests of the child not only teaches content, but also creates the conditions for children to feel safe, valued, and capable—an indispensable prerequisite for meaningful learning. From this standpoint, the best interests of the child functions as a criterion of pedagogical quality, guiding the selection of methodologies and teaching strategies.

Children's Participation and Active Listening as a Right

Children's participation and active listening constitute essential components of the best interests of the child and are explicitly recognized as rights within international child protection frameworks. In early childhood education, these rights take on a particular form adapted to children's age and developmental stage, yet they are no less significant. Recent literature underscores that early participation contributes to the development of autonomy, self-esteem, and communicative skills (Lansdown, 2021).

From a pedagogical perspective, children's participation is manifested when children are provided with genuine opportunities to express opinions, make simple decisions, choose materials, or propose activities within the classroom. Active listening, in turn, implies that teachers value and legitimize children's expressions—both verbal and non-verbal—recognizing them as valid forms of communication.

In the Ecuadorian context, promoting children's participation and active listening poses cultural and pedagogical challenges, particularly in settings where adult-centered conceptions of education persist. Nevertheless, recent studies indicate that the incorporation of participatory practices in early childhood education fosters positive school coexistence and strengthens teacher–student relationships (Paredes & Toapanta, 2023).

From the perspective of the best interests of the child, participation should not be interpreted as a total relinquishment of authority, but rather as a progressive and guided exercise of autonomy. In this sense, teachers act as mediators, creating conditions for children's voices to be heard without compromising their protection and well-being. Contemporary literature emphasizes that this ethical mediation is crucial to avoiding simplistic or instrumentalized interpretations of children's participation (Peleg, 2022).

In summary, the relationship between the best interests of the child and pedagogical practice is materialized through planning, assessment, school coexistence, child-centered methodologies, and the promotion of children's participation. When guided by a rights-based approach, these elements shape a network of pedagogical decisions that contribute to the construction of educational experiences that are respectful, inclusive, and consistent with children's dignity.

Methodology

Research Approach and Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach, aimed at understanding teachers' perceptions, experiences, and practices related to the application of the principle of the best interests of the child in early childhood education. This approach is appropriate for the analysis of complex educational phenomena of an ethical and contextual nature, which require an interpretive perspective rather than quantitative measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

The study adopted a descriptive–interpretive design with an exploratory scope, as it seeks to describe and interpret how early childhood teachers understand and translate the principle of the best interests of the child into their everyday pedagogical practice. This type of design allows for the analysis of meanings and practices from the perspective of educational actors themselves, without aiming to establish causal relationships or statistical generalizations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2021).

From an epistemological standpoint, the research is situated within the interpretive paradigm, which conceives educational reality as a social construction mediated by participants' experiences and discourses. Within this framework, the study focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, taking into account the Ecuadorian educational context and the ethical dimension of teaching practice.

Context and Participants

The study was conducted in early childhood education institutions within the Ecuadorian context, belonging to the formal education system. The educational setting is characterized by the provision of services to children enrolled in Initial 1 and Initial 2 levels, within environments aligned with current national regulations and early childhood curricular guidelines. The participating institutions serve socially and culturally diverse populations, allowing for a contextualized analysis of the principle of the best interests of the child in pedagogical practice.

Participants were practicing early childhood teachers selected through purposive sampling, based on their direct experience at the early childhood level and their active involvement in pedagogical processes with young children. The sample consisted of 20 early childhood teachers, selected through purposive sampling, considering criteria such as professional experience at the level and availability to participate in the study. The participant selection criteria were as follows: a) currently working as an early childhood education teacher in Ecuadorian educational institutions; b) having minimum professional experience at the early childhood level; c) voluntarily agreeing to participate in the study; and d) willingness to reflect on pedagogical practice from a rights-based and professional ethics perspective.

The selection of participants was guided by the need to obtain relevant and meaningful information regarding the phenomenon under study, prioritizing the richness and depth of data over statistical representativeness, in accordance with the qualitative research approach.

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Qualitative techniques consistent with the study's approach and design were employed for data collection, with the aim of understanding teachers' perceptions and practices related to the principle of the best interests of the child in early childhood education.

Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary data collection technique, as they allowed for in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences, interpretations, and reflections regarding pedagogical practice and ethical dilemmas associated with the guarantee of children's rights in early childhood. The interviews were structured around open-ended questions organized according to categories derived from the theoretical framework, while maintaining flexibility to explore emerging issues.

In addition, non-participant classroom observations were conducted to identify concrete pedagogical practices related to planning, school coexistence, and teacher–student interaction. Observations were recorded using a structured guide that enabled the systematic documentation of behaviors and dynamics relevant to the study.

Document analysis of educational regulations, curricular guidelines, and institutional documents related to early childhood education and children's rights protection was also carried out. This process allowed for the contextualization of teaching practices within the current normative framework. Although

the study was qualitative in nature, no structured surveys were administered for statistical purposes, as priority was given to techniques that support interpretive depth.

Regarding validity and trustworthiness, rigor criteria specific to qualitative research were applied. Credibility was ensured through triangulation of techniques (interviews, observation, and document analysis), enabling cross-verification of data from multiple sources. Methodological coherence was established through alignment among the study's objectives, theoretical approach, and instruments. Finally, transparency of the research process was strengthened through clear description of data collection and analysis procedures, contributing to the trustworthiness of the study.

Procedure

The study was carried out in four clearly defined phases, which systematically organized the research process.

In the first phase, a review and systematization of the theoretical and normative framework related to early childhood education, the rights-based approach, and the principle of the best interests of the child were conducted, providing the conceptual foundation of the study and informing the definition of analytical categories.

In the second phase, participants were selected according to the established criteria, and data collection instruments (interview guide, observation guide, and document analysis matrix) were designed. Prior to implementation, the instruments were reviewed to ensure coherence with the research objectives.

The third phase involved data collection. During this stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participating teachers, non-participant classroom observations were carried out, and relevant institutional and normative documents were collected.

In the fourth and final phase, data analysis and interpretation were undertaken through processes of data organization, coding, and categorization, enabling the identification of patterns, convergences, and tensions related to the best interests of the child and pedagogical practice in early childhood education.

With regard to ethical considerations, the study adhered to fundamental principles of educational research ethics. Voluntary participation of teachers was ensured through informed consent, as well as confidentiality and anonymity of the information provided. Given that the study involved educational contexts with young children, direct intervention with children was avoided, prioritizing respectful observation and responsible use of information. Furthermore, the research process was conducted in a manner that did not disrupt pedagogical activities or compromise participants' integrity, in line with the rights-based approach and the principle of the best interests of the child.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using inductive thematic analysis, based on initial coding and the construction of emerging categories, following criteria of recurrence and meaning.

Results

The results are presented in an organized manner based on the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. Through the processes of coding and categorization, central categories emerged that make it possible to understand how early childhood teachers interpret and apply the principle of the best interests of the child in their pedagogical practice, as well as the ethical tensions they face in their daily professional work.

Understanding of the Best Interests of the Child from Teaching Practice

A first emerging category relates to teachers' conceptual and practical understanding of the best interests of the child. Participating teachers recognize this principle as an important normative reference, mainly associated with children's well-being, protection, and comprehensive care. However, the analysis reveals that their understanding is constructed more from practical experience than from a systematic theoretical or legal appropriation.

In teachers' discourse, the best interests of the child are commonly associated with expressions such as "making sure the child is well," "thinking of the child first," or "not causing harm," which reflects an interpretation focused on care and emotional protection. Nevertheless, limited explicit articulation is

observed between this principle and concepts such as children's participation, rights, or ethically grounded pedagogical decision-making. This suggests that, although the principle is present in discourse, its application tends to be intuitive rather than fully conscious or conceptually grounded.

Pedagogical Practices Oriented toward Children's Well-Being

A second emerging category concerns pedagogical practices oriented toward children's well-being, which constitute a concrete manifestation of the best interests of the child in the classroom. Based on observations and interviews, practices centered on the creation of emotionally safe environments, respect for learning rhythms, and the use of play as a primary pedagogical strategy were identified.

Teachers emphasized the importance of fostering trust and emotional security, avoiding punitive or authoritarian practices. In this regard, pedagogical actions consistent with the ethics of care were observed, such as emotional containment during episodes of distress, dialogic mediation of conflicts, and the adaptation of activities according to children's emotional states. These practices reflect a genuine concern for children's well-being, although they are not always explicitly recognized as actions linked to a rights-based approach.

However, tensions were also identified between these practices and institutional demands, particularly in relation to planning requirements and the fulfillment of curricular objectives. In some cases, these pressures limit the pedagogical flexibility needed to prioritize the best interests of the child.

Ethical Dilemmas in Pedagogical Decision-Making

A third emerging category refers to ethical dilemmas in pedagogical decision-making. Teachers reported situations in which they must choose between complying with institutional regulations and responding to children's individual needs. These dilemmas arise, for example, in behavior management, developmental assessment, or the attention to children with diverse educational needs.

The results indicate that, in such situations, teachers tend to rely on personal criteria and professional experience rather than on institutionalized ethical guidelines. This highlights the absence of formal spaces for ethical reflection within educational institutions, as well as the need to strengthen teacher education in professional ethics and rights-based approaches.

Despite these limitations, a reflective stance was observed among several participants, who acknowledged the importance of "doing what is right for the child," even when this involves questioning traditional practices or flexibilizing established norms. This disposition underscores the role of the teacher as a moral agent in early childhood education.

Children's Participation and Active Listening in the Classroom

Another relevant category is related to children's participation and active listening. The results indicate that teachers value children's expression and recognize the importance of listening to them; however, children's participation is often limited to minor decisions or teacher-directed activities, rather than being fully recognized as a right exercised in a systematic manner.

Observations reveal that active listening is practiced mainly during moments of individual interaction or conflict resolution, but it is not consistently integrated into pedagogical planning. This suggests that children's participation is still conceived more as a pedagogical strategy than as a fundamental right linked to the best interests of the child.

Relationship between Teaching Practice, Ethics, and a Rights-Based Approach

Transversally, the results reveal a close but not fully articulated relationship between teaching practice, professional ethics, and the rights-based approach. Teachers largely act based on implicit ethical principles—such as care, respect, and responsibility—that align with the foundations of a rights-based approach, albeit without explicit awareness of this correspondence.

This lack of theoretical articulation does not invalidate the observed practices; however, it does highlight a gap between the normative framework and consciously grounded pedagogical practice. The findings suggest that strengthening teacher education in ethics and children's rights would provide greater coherence and critical awareness in pedagogical decision-making, contributing to a more systematic application of the principle of the best interests of the child.

Discussion

Critical Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study indicate that the principle of the best interests of the child is present in Ecuadorian early childhood teaching practice primarily through actions oriented toward care, protection, and children's emotional well-being. However, this presence tends to be implicit and intuitive rather than the result of a conscious and systematic appropriation of a rights-based approach. This situation confirms the existence of a gap between the normative framework and everyday pedagogical practice, as previously noted in the introduction.

From a critical perspective, it can be argued that teachers act based on personal ethical values—such as care, empathy, and responsibility—that align with the foundations of the best interests of the child, yet without explicitly recognizing these actions as part of a broader legal and ethical mandate. While this lack of explicit articulation does not invalidate the observed practices, it does limit their transformative potential, as such practices remain dependent on individual experience rather than on shared institutional criteria.

Moreover, the results show that ethical dilemmas are a constant feature of teaching practice, particularly when institutional demands conflict with children's actual needs. This finding suggests that the best interests of the child do not always operate as the guiding criterion in pedagogical decision-making, but rather compete with other educational system logics, such as administrative compliance or process standardization.

Comparison with Previous Studies and the Theoretical Framework

The findings of this study are consistent with recent research indicating that, in early childhood education, the rights-based approach is more frequently incorporated at a discursive level than in practical implementation, and that its effective application largely depends on teachers' ethical and pedagogical training. Studies conducted in Latin American contexts have shown that teachers acknowledge the importance of the best interests of the child but face difficulties in translating this principle into concrete pedagogical decisions, particularly in contexts characterized by high institutional pressure.

In line with the discussion presented in Section 2.1, the results reinforce the idea that early childhood education continues, in many cases, to be conceived through a school-preparatory logic, which conflicts with its role as a space for the guarantee of rights. This tension is reflected in assessment and organizational practices that do not always respect developmental rhythms or the centrality of play—both fundamental elements of a rights-based approach to early childhood.

Similarly, the findings dialogue with the arguments developed in Section 2.2, confirming that the best interests of the child function as a normatively recognized principle that is nevertheless difficult to operationalize pedagogically. The predominantly assistential interpretation of the principle, focused on protection and care, aligns with recent literature warning of the risk of reducing this principle to a paternalistic notion detached from children's participation and agency.

Regarding Section 2.3, the results confirm that the ethical dimension of teaching practice is largely constructed through an implicit ethics of care rather than through formal processes of ethical deliberation. This finding is consistent with studies highlighting the lack of institutional spaces for ethical reflection among teachers, which forces educators to resolve complex dilemmas individually, without systematic support.

Finally, in relation to Section 2.4, the findings indicate that children's participation and active listening have not yet been fully consolidated as rights exercised within pedagogical practice, but rather as occasional strategies. This observation reinforces the need to advance toward pedagogies that are more coherent with the best interests of the child, integrating children's participation as a structural axis rather than an ancillary resource.

Pedagogical and Ethical Implications of the Principle of the Best Interests of the Child

From a pedagogical standpoint, the study's findings point to the need to reorient early childhood teaching practice toward a more conscious and theoretically grounded understanding of the best interests of the child. This entails strengthening pedagogical planning centered on holistic development, revisiting assessment practices, and promoting models of school coexistence based on respect, mediation, and care.

At the ethical level, the findings underscore the urgency of strengthening teacher education in professional ethics and rights-based approaches, so that educators are equipped with conceptual and practical tools to address the dilemmas that arise in everyday classroom practice. Recognizing teachers as moral agents implies providing them with spaces for reflection, accompaniment, and professional dialogue that allow intuitive ethical responses to be transformed into deliberate and informed pedagogical action.

Furthermore, the study reveals that guaranteeing the best interests of the child cannot rely solely on individual teachers' goodwill, but requires an institutional commitment expressed through coherent school policies, ethical pedagogical leadership, and institutional cultures centered on children's well-being. In this sense, the principle of the best interests of the child must be assumed as a transversal axis of educational management rather than merely as a normative reference.

Contributions of the Study to the Field of Early Childhood Education

This study contributes to the field of early childhood education by providing a situated qualitative analysis of the relationship between the principle of the best interests of the child, teaching ethics, and pedagogical practice within the Ecuadorian context. Unlike studies focused exclusively on legal frameworks or isolated pedagogical approaches, this research integrates both dimensions, revealing the tensions and possibilities that emerge in real classroom practice.

Additionally, the study helps to make visible the role of teachers as guarantors of children's rights, highlighting the ethical dimension of their work and the need to recognize it as a central component of educational quality in early childhood. This contribution is relevant both for educational research and for the formulation of public policies and teacher education programs.

Finally, the findings provide input for future research aimed at deepening the study of ethical training strategies, pedagogical support mechanisms, and institutional design that can strengthen the effective application of the best interests of the child in early childhood education. In this sense, the study not only describes an existing reality but also opens lines of reflection and action toward a more just, humane, and rights-consistent early childhood education.

Among the limitations of the study, the qualitative nature of the research and the small sample size are acknowledged, which do not allow for statistical generalization but do enable a deep and contextualized understanding of the phenomenon.

Conclusions

This study analyzed the principle of the best interests of the child in Ecuadorian early childhood education and its pedagogical and ethical implications for teaching practice, using a qualitative and interpretive approach. Based on the analysis of the perceptions, experiences, and practices of the participating teachers, the findings indicate that this principle is present in educational practice, although in an implicit, fragmented, and weakly systematized manner. This confirms the existence of a gap between the normative framework for the protection of children's rights and its conscious application in classroom practice.

Regarding the synthesis of findings, the results show that teachers primarily associate the best interests of the child with care, protection, and emotional well-being. This reflects an intuitive understanding of the principle, more closely linked to personal ethical values than to an explicit conceptual and legal appropriation. Likewise, it was identified that many pedagogical practices—such as the creation of emotionally safe environments, respect for learning rhythms, and dialogic mediation of conflicts—are consistent with a rights-based approach, even though they are not always recognized as such. Nevertheless, tensions also emerged related to institutional demands, traditional assessment practices, and limited opportunities for children's participation, which hinder the full application of the best interests of the child.

From a final reflection on the teaching role, the study confirms that early childhood teachers act as direct guarantors of children's rights, fulfilling a fundamental ethical and moral role in the protection, promotion, and realization of the best interests of the child. This function transcends the technical dimension of teaching and positions teachers as key agents in the construction of educational experiences that respect children's dignity. However, assuming this role in a conscious and sustained manner requires not only personal commitment but also institutional conditions, specific training, and spaces for ethical reflection that strengthen pedagogical decision-making from a rights-based perspective.

In terms of recommendations for educational practice, it is suggested to strengthen initial and ongoing teacher education in areas related to professional ethics, children's rights, and the pedagogical application of the principle of the best interests of the child. It is also necessary to promote institutional cultures that integrate this principle as a transversal axis of planning, assessment, and school coexistence, preventing it from being reduced to a merely normative statement. Additionally, the promotion of child-centered pedagogical practices that recognize children's participation and active listening as rights—rather than optional teaching strategies—is strongly recommended.

Finally, regarding directions for future research, this study opens the possibility of further exploring the principle of the best interests of the child through comparative approaches across different educational contexts, levels, or modalities of early childhood education. It also suggests the development of research examining the impact of ethical teacher training programs and pedagogical support on the effective application of rights-based approaches. Likewise, future studies could incorporate the perspectives of other educational actors, such as school leaders and families, in order to broaden understanding of the phenomenon from a more comprehensive standpoint.

In conclusion, the principle of the best interests of the child constitutes a fundamental axis for rethinking early childhood education from an ethical, pedagogical, and rights-based perspective. Its effective application in teaching practice represents an ongoing challenge for the Ecuadorian education system, but also an opportunity to advance toward a more humane, inclusive, and dignity-centered early childhood education.

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