

Review article

University extension in the training of early childhood educators



La extensión universitaria en la formación del educador de la primera infancia

Extensão universitária na formação de educadores da primeira infância

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ABSTRACT

University outreach, given its importance and complexity, plays a fundamental role in the cultural and reciprocal relationship between the university and society. Therefore, this study proposes to improve, through university outreach, the training of early childhood educators, so that it becomes an integrating and dynamic element in educational work, fostering social transformation through the management of intra- and extra-university activities. The research was conducted on a dialectical-materialist basis. Empirical and theoretical methods were used; a thorough literature review was carried out, drawing on an extensive source of documents and authors from scholars who have addressed the topic. The result is a historical study of university outreach and the main elements related to early childhood educators. The main conclusions demonstrate its transformative consolidation, which contributes to strengthening the university-community-society triad, as well as the work of early childhood educators.

Keywords: university extension; teacher training; early childhood educator.

RESUMEN

La extensión universitaria, dada su importancia y complejidad, tiene un rol fundamental en la relación cultural y recíproca entre la universidad y la sociedad. Es por ello que se propone mejorar, desde la extensión universitaria, la formación del educador de la Primera Infancia, de modo tal que se articule como un elemento integrador y dinamizador en la labor educativa, en aras de favorecer la transformación social mediante la gestión de las actividades intra y extrauniversitarias. La investigación se realizó sobre una base dialéctico-materialista. Se utilizaron métodos del nivel empírico y teórico; se efectuó una profunda revisión bibliográfica de una extensa fuente de documentos y de autores conformada por estudiosos que han abordado el tema. Como resultado, se brindó el estudio histórico sobre la extensión universitaria y los elementos principales relacionados con el educador de la Primera Infancia. Como principales conclusiones se mostró su consolidación transformadora, que contribuye a potenciar la tríada universidad-comunidad-sociedad, así como la labor del educador de la Primera Infancia.

Palabras clave: extensión universitaria; formación de educadores; educador de la primera infancia.

RESUMO

A extensão universitária, dada a sua importância e complexidade, desempenha um papel fundamental na relação cultural e recíproca entre a universidade e a sociedade. Portanto, este estudo propõe aprimorar, por meio da extensão universitária, a formação de educadores da primeira infância, de modo que esta se torne um elemento integrador e dinâmico no trabalho educativo, visando fomentar a transformação social através da gestão de atividades intra e extrauniversitárias. A pesquisa foi conduzida com base dialéctico-materialista. Foram utilizados métodos empíricos e teóricos; realizou-se uma revisão bibliográfica aprofundada, com base em uma extensa fonte de documentos e autores de estudiosos que abordaram o tema. Como resultado, apresentou-se um estudo histórico da extensão universitária e dos principais elementos relacionados aos educadores da primeira infância. As principais conclusões demonstram sua consolidação transformadora, que contribui para o

fortalecimento da tríade universidade-comunidade-sociedade, bem como para o trabalho dos educadores da primeira infância.

Palavras-chave: extensão universitária; formação de professores; educador da primeira infância.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are committed to strengthening university outreach to achieve greater social development. Their mission is to contribute effectively to this process, which transforms the university into a leading agent of change and empowerment. For this reason, a commitment is needed to promote and defend national and cultural heritage and identity, thereby fostering the integration of core processes.

According to Nuñez et al. (2017), university extension is currently viewed as a fundamental process, as it is crucial for a nation's development in all areas. Its aims range from the development and promotion of culture; it is then that a relationship arises between teaching, research, and extension, with the goal of raising the general level of culture.

It has been observed that this scenario provides a close link between the university and the state, since it makes it possible to respond to the needs of society and the development of the 2030 Agenda. Within this order, extension stands out as the most real representation of interconnecting the university with society; becoming a fundamental axis of the university's social commitment.

Regarding definitions of university extension, several authors (MES, 2004; Tommasino & Stevenazzi, 2016; Cano & Ingol, 2020; González et al., 2021; Jiménez et al., 2024; Aguiar & Baute, 2023) conceive of it as a process that must respond to social policies, which in turn promote the training of professionals with a social commitment aligned with the demands of their professional profile. In this sense, extension programs must be aligned with social policies, strategic objectives, and guidelines to achieve better educational quality.

In relation to this issue, the UN (2021) affirms that teachers are given a fundamental role, insofar as they fulfill international responsibilities for the protection of children. This is part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, which agree on guaranteeing

inclusive, balanced, and quality education that creates lifelong learning opportunities for children, youth, and adults.

It is important to highlight that transformations in technology, the economy, culture, and society necessitate changes in the management of university processes (González et al., 2021), particularly in the core processes of higher education. The use of social media as a form of entertainment should be a tool for educational contexts, promoting information that benefits education and human development; therefore, university outreach must modernize its management.

Jimenez et al. (2024) consider that, despite the multiple designations, university extension carries with it a great social responsibility in which the university has a fundamental role, since it recognizes the shortcomings of society and reaffirms itself on the basis of cultural promotion as a function and method, in its own interaction with the other substantive university processes.

It is therefore argued that university outreach, as expressed by Cano and Ingol (2020), is a fundamental element for addressing problems that arise in different locations. In short, it is conclusively stated that university outreach is the articulation of the University's work.

Now, regarding early childhood educators, research (Castro, 2003; Martín, 2015; Hernández et al., 2018; Cabrera et al., 2022; García & Escalona, 2022; Cruz et al., 2023; Sagarra et al., 2022; Colas & Revé, 2025) highlights the teacher as the individual who establishes and formulates their unique characteristics as a social being within the educational process. This connection and relationship with students fosters their progress, their understanding of social issues, and their role in cultural transformation. Therefore, it is significant that education is an integral part of culture, and thus, both teachers and students are involved in the process of its construction, reconstruction, preservation, and improvement.

Within this framework, the approach of Cabrera et al. (2022) is emphasized; who acknowledge that teacher training is part of a period of pedagogical learning. Based on the potential of those involved, it is systematic, investigative, and dialogical; it involves the configuration and self-transformation of the teacher and encompasses educational mechanisms and the relationship between cognition and affect, grounded in meaningful and developmental learning, which reveals the shortcomings in the personal development of both teachers and their students. Thus, culture, communication and social interaction are essential intermediaries; it is instituted from the intentionality and interdisciplinarity in favor of social transformation.

The aim is for early childhood educators to cultivate an organizational discipline that demonstrates their knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes through their participatory role within the university. This includes the substantive processes that emerge to transform their educational practice, geared towards the needs of society in diverse contexts. While university outreach certainly fosters creativity through its interaction with schools, communities, and families, it also draws upon the educational experience, inquiry, and socialization within cultural spaces, drawing from various disciplines and providing timely solutions to the professional challenges encountered.

In this regard, the following addresses a group of impacts related to the university extension in the Early Childhood Educator at the University of Pinar del Río Hermanos Saíz Montes de Oca, as well as the influence on this beautiful mission.

DEVELOPMENT

The National Program of University Extension for Cuban Higher Education specifies that university extension is a process that is confirmed in the set of university-society interactions, with the intention of promoting culture in the university and its environment; thus it is interrelated with the other processes of Higher Education (Cuba. Ministry of Higher Education, MES, 2004).

Furthermore, it is clear that the Ministry of Higher Education (MES), in genuine collaboration with other sectors and institutions, promotes numerous initiatives in which the extension process plays a central role. This ensures that institutional, national, and regional research programs and projects are developed during the 2023-2025 period. One such project is "University Extension Management: A Contextualized Model for the Comprehensive Training of Professionals." Participating institutions include several universities nationwide, among them the University of Pinar del Río Hermanos Saíz Montes de Oca, and its institutional project, "Managing the Extension Process as a Process that Contributes to the Comprehensive Training of the Professional Profile, from Educational Support to Quality of Performance."

The evidence revealed through the introduction of these preceding scientific studies shows that the actions that contribute to the articulation of training processes in the professional profile are still insufficient, which demands an integrative vision, in order to achieve the improvement and satisfaction of the demands of society and a high impact on development, for educational care in Early Childhood, with the intention of contributing to its performance.

In line with the current context, universities are shown to be fundamental in academic training, research, employment and university extension; the latter being referred to today with other definitions, depending on the generalities and purposes that are determined related to its identification, purposes, particularities and effects to be evaluated.

Within this framework, university outreach aims to transfer the knowledge constructed in the academic context to society, fostering a dialogue of knowledge and offering a form of social outreach, interactive extension, community engagement, or whatever its specific designation may be. There are shared guidelines that define it; thus, it is committed to promoting the culture surrounding the university.

It is observed that in the universities of Latin America and the Caribbean, the university extension, from its experiences, is instituted as an element that composes and dynamizes, and also contributes to the permanent and mutual cultural bond; it succeeds in being transformed again and again, in so far as it links the university with society and facilitates the exchange between its factors as a consequence of activity and communication, while regrouping its purposes to support the other university functions and the university itself. It also enables the transformation of society, starting from its own participation in the global aspects of the social environment.

The formative approach prepares individuals capable of facing complex challenges and integrating academic knowledge with ethical values and practical skills. In the context of early childhood and university education, this translates into: training educators capable of applying active and participatory methodologies, generating a positive impact on the community and educational environments, and promoting constant reflection on professional practice to improve educational quality.

Based on this premise, Lazo (2025) proposes his ideas regarding the integration of university activities through specialized departments. These departments would direct the work of other university departments and program university projects across all social spheres within the national context. Furthermore, it was detailed that university extension should encompass the fields of scientific, literary, and artistic knowledge, utilizing all the resources that contemporary technology offers to culture, while simultaneously encouraging literary, artistic, and scientific creation through competitions, contests, and exhibitions.

From a reorganization of ideas, it is clear that it is important to take a journey through the fundamental stages of university extension in Cuba, based on an analysis from Rovira et al. (2024).

Cuba, during its colonial and neocolonial periods (1728-1959), followed the guidelines that defined Latin American universities. The University of Havana undertook arduous work to strengthen its social function, influenced by the Córdoba Reform in Argentina, where university extension programs were first discussed. There, the need for the university to be part of the solution to social problems was established, with outstanding students and professors playing a significant role.

This was a more original phase, marked by Julio Antonio Mella's creation of the José Martí Popular University in 1923. It encompassed everything from literacy programs to advanced academic courses, fostering cultural exchange among intellectuals, students, and the general public. He felt this was insufficient and envisioned a social and political transformation that would engage both the university and the people. To this end, artistic and cultural initiatives were developed in conjunction with the University of Oriente and the Central University of Las Villas, founded in 1947 and 1952, respectively.

Later, by Rectoral Resolution at the University of Havana, the University Extension Commission was created, which recognized the need for an opportune moment for the cultural and spiritual progress of Cuba; but, in 1952, cultural extension activities were reduced until they disappeared, as the University of Havana closed in 1956.

In the Revolutionary stage, from 1959 to the present, there is a moment in which university extension is expanded, through provisions established by the MES and the University of Pinar del Río, as a reflection of what is happening in Cuba.

A greater exchange was achieved between the Higher Education institution and society; it was seen as a responsibility that begins from the new nomenclature of university extension and within it, the department of Cultural Activities.

The Ministry of Higher Education (MES) was created in 1976, introducing new five-year programs under Study Plan A in the 1977-1978 academic year, coinciding with a surge in the Amateur Artists Movement. In 1983, its activities were organized around artistic and athletic pursuits, neglecting academic, professional, and research processes. With Study Plan B, objectives were structured

around themes, academic content was reduced, and the link between theory and practice increased, thus enhancing practical experience.

In 1988, the University Extension Development Program in Higher Education and the Program for the Comprehensive Cultural Development of University Students were created, and the First Scientific Conference on Cultural Work in Higher Education took place.

Institutional activities gained prominence in the development of cultural outreach: sports games, amateur artist festivals, visits to historical sites, meetings with artists and writers, among others.

At this stage, the Houses of Culture already had art instructors and provided artistic training, which contributed to the educational and political-ideological work at the universities. In the 1992-1993 academic year, with Study Plan C, Honorary Chairs were created at the universities with the mission of encouraging research and political-ideological work through academic, cultural, and political development.

It was during this period of cultural outreach that the first national research projects emerged, and in 1998, with the introduction of the revised Plan C, the outreach component was strengthened and the Amateur Artists Movement was revitalized. Universities joined the Battle of Ideas, and in 2000, university chairs for senior citizens were established to involve new social sectors in outreach efforts.

Rovira et al. (2024) highlights that in the 2001-2002 academic year the universalization of Higher Education began and, from there, a greater space was achieved in the transformation of university extension with a new dimension, for educational and political and ideological work, with a new role in the strategic planning of teaching departments.

With the creation of the National University Extension Program, in the 2007-2008 academic year, Plan D began: teaching hours were reduced, self-study was given more space in the teaching-learning process with the leading role of the students, and tasks with impact on society were an inseparable part of the extension work; there is a greater use of communication technologies to support student learning.

From this point forward, early childhood educators, teachers in general, and university professionals rely on theoretical frameworks that integrate professional identity, competencies, reflective practice, and social context. Methodologically, this requires designed training pathways, active teaching and

learning strategies, formative assessment, and innovative tools. Recent research (2022–2025) confirms that professional development should focus on the practical transformation of the trainee, the link between theory and practice, integration with real-world contexts and the community, the design of coherent, progressive, and supervised programs, and continuous formative assessment that allows for adjustments and improvements.

The educational approach of university extension allows the preparation of early childhood educators capable of facing complex challenges, integrating academic knowledge with ethical values and practical skills.

However, as Rojas (2018) explains, university extension has an essential role in achieving these objectives, since it acts as a mediator between the university and society; in this way it deploys actions based on its theoretical pretensions, which is still an insufficiency that we wish to eliminate.

Thus, pedagogical practice, necessarily linked to society, as Rojas (2018) explains, has confirmed that it must address the transformations of students, from the incorporation of each science and the outreach activities that are part of their professional development. Meanwhile, the university will be involved in a distinctly human process, as it situates itself within cultural and holistic education.

In this sense, university extension is also configured as an essential training component, by providing early childhood educators with real, participatory and reflective experiences that promote the comprehensive training of professionals.

One of the most important components, identified by González et al. (2015), is their intention towards work from specialized departments and that they have the work of the other departments of the university; thus they conceive of university tasks, in such a way that they involve the necessary resources, for the development of skills for the sake of culture.

For these reasons, training is considered a vital element in fulfilling the social mission attributed to the university, within which the University Extension department is tasked with attending to the educational process in general and to contribute to the integral formation of the intra- and extra-university community, by collaborating with the transformation of society, based on its participation in the global aspects of the social environment.

Therefore, early childhood educators have access to cultural resources that enable them to develop their knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes. They can renew these resources through personal and social experience, which they then use to enhance their communication and cognitive development. The university plays a crucial role in this process of appropriation, particularly through the management of its core processes, especially university extension programs.

Returning to the words of Escalona (2021), it is consistent with the fact that professional pedagogical performance is the determining action of educators or, in other words, having an adequate mastery of their roles and the professional skills that must be timely and essential in the object of their profession, to contribute to an educational care in an integral and inclusive way, for children of Early Childhood and guidance to their families.

On the other hand, Capote et al. (2022) argues that for adequate professional performance, one must start from a professional culture, composed of knowledge, values and attitudes that are involved in favor of the experiences that are lived and of that exchange in the work tasks themselves, which are a space that emerges from knowledge, know-how and know-how.

From this perspective, extension holds a cultural value, which is pronounced among knowledge, skills, values and attitudes, and which gives the Early Childhood educator a set of tools for the understanding of contemporary cultural phenomena or processes, to achieve their enablement and to adopt a critical and reflective position on them, depending on the context.

In this cultural space, a link is established between promotion and creation, fostering a pedagogical environment in which creative relationships are proposed, based on the integration of the group and its members, to strengthen culture and promote their professional and comprehensive development.

It is of utmost importance to highlight the cross-cutting formative nature of university extension in the training of early childhood educators. Rovira et al. (2024) point out its relevance from its substantive processes: academic, research, professional, and extension.

The overall development of children must be achieved by immersing the early childhood educator in each situation, and as a result of their actions in the university context and their environment, by strengthening their integration with the teaching and research process.

Incidentally, Rovira et al. (2024) distinguish that what makes the extension value recognized in the training of the Early Childhood educator is that it converges between a group of transversal lines of research and that are common axes to their training process, including communication, ethics and social responsibility, among others.

Bermúdez and Díaz (2015) confirm that early childhood educators are responsible for children's initial development. For this reason, they must emphasize the refinement of general intellectual and motor skills, as well as habits that facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, abilities, values, and attitudes. This ensures a smooth transition through different areas of development, later transforming children into engaged citizens who interact with others, are decisive and organized, and possess the necessary tools to protect the environment and safeguard peace—the aims of global civic education. The authors consider early childhood to be the most important stage for achieving these goals.

Similarly, Lugo and Moreno (2022) refer to the teacher's disposition as an orderly and permanent process that affirms their professional development and the appropriation of pedagogical skills, in order to strengthen the transformation of educational practices in Preschool Education in general and in Music Education in particular; all this, with a view to renewing the quality of the teaching-learning process, which depends on the improvement of the professional pedagogical performance of the Early Childhood educator.

On the other hand, Sagarra et al. (2022) state that a significant path for the permanent and continuous training of educators and teachers is to promote the exercise of their functions: guidance, scientific-methodological and improvement, as well as the strengthening of their skills in research, communicative exchange and the use of technological tools.

Almestro et al. (2023), in relation to teacher training and performance, argues that the use of digital media in schools is an essential approach. This is a point of agreement; however, it is necessary to consider the specific needs of each teacher in the use of these tools, particularly regarding their professional performance.

According to technological resources, Abreu et al. (2024) point out that they become complementary means that transmit messages, helping to present content through acoustic, optical or combined systems.

As proposed in the approaches to teacher training, the authors were allowed to take as a criterion that, in order to achieve the indispensable efficiency in the Early Childhood educator, it is important to reflect on the link between theory, practice, the mastery of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes focused on obtaining appropriate pedagogical work methods, for the particularities of Early Childhood children.

Therefore, a series of changes in social life and education play a crucial role in this development, reinforcing the premise regarding social representation and the legacy of material and spiritual culture introduced by society. For this reason, it presents a challenge for early childhood educators, requiring them to engage in ongoing research that addresses children's needs and embraces their complexities in their educational work.

From the authors' perspective, the above underscores that the professional development of early childhood educators is crucial for educational change. It is important not only to impart knowledge but also to cultivate skills, values, and attitudes in order to achieve an innovative educational process that considers the needs and strengths of children, their families, and the community in which they carry out their dedicated daily work.

As a result, universities outreach aims to connect academic, research, and professional knowledge with social, cultural, and community realities, fostering a two-way relationship between the university and society. This, in turn, produces early childhood educators who are aligned with the required teaching and learning process. In this sense, university outreach also serves as an essential formative component, providing real-world, participatory, and reflective experiences that contribute to the holistic development of future professionals.

In summary, to achieve a suitable process that contributes to the child's holistic development, early childhood educators must be involved, from their initial and ongoing training, in a cultural and professional exchange environment, drawing on the sciences relevant to their educational context. This also involves the agencies and stakeholders who contribute, in some way, to the child's development. To this end, they need the necessary tools, which, combined with current demands, enable them to master the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes required to effectively manage education in today's Cuban schools.

CONCLUSIONS

The literature review made it possible to establish the theoretical, epistemological and pedagogical principles that support university extension as a fundamental component in the comprehensive training of early childhood educators.

From contemporary approaches to Higher Education, from both national and international authors, it can be stated that university extension transcends the traditional vision of complementary activity, to consolidate itself as a pedagogical, social and transformative process, which contributes to the articulation between University-Early Childhood educator-family-society.

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Conflict of interest

Authors declare no conflict of interests.

Authors' contribution

The authors participated in the design and writing of the article, in the search and analysis of the information contained in the consulted bibliography.



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