

The need to have a legal framework for the early years: an interview with Osmar Terra

Osmar Terra is a political leader in early childhood in Brazil. A paediatrician, he is now President of the Parliamentary Front for Early Childhood in the National Congress of Brazil. When serving as the Secretary for Health in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, he created and implemented the *Primeira Infância Melhor* (PIM) (Better Early Childhood) programme, which provides home visiting services at scale. Here he talks to *Early Childhood Matters* about promoting support for early learning on a national scale.

You are kindly taking time out from the Seminário Internacional Marco Legal da Primeira Infância (International Seminar on a Legal Framework for Early Childhood) to speak to us. Can you tell us about what you're hoping the seminar will achieve?

Since the early 1990s, Brazil has had a specific law about children and adolescents, the *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente*. It was one of the first countries to build a legislative framework on the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. But in the two decades since then, our scientific understanding of the importance of early childhood has advanced dramatically, and existing laws have not changed to keep pace. So we are seeking to create a new legal framework in Brazil to address young children – a framework that can guide municipalities and states in improving the quality of children's first years.

The Chair of the Parliamentary Congress, Henrique Eduardo Alves, has announced the creation of a special commission to work on this new legal framework. The objective of the seminar is to agree on a proposal for the commission to evaluate, taking into account experiences from different parts of Brazil, across Latin America and around the world.

There seems to be a lot of momentum around the early years in Brazil at present.

There is. The President, Dilma Rousseff, has created a national programme called *Brasil Carinhoso* ('Loving Brazil'), which is already reaching millions of the most disadvantaged families with financial support. In

addition, 8000 new kindergartens are being created across the country, with support for municipalities to build and equip the centres and cover personnel costs.

The President often talks about the importance of early childhood; perhaps she is inspired by having a very young grandson herself. So we have an opportunity to move forward with improving care and early stimulation by establishing home visiting programmes like PIM, which we implemented in Rio Grande do Sul, on a national scale.

Tell us about PIM.

PIM was inspired by a few home visiting programmes in other countries, among them the *Educa a tu Hijo* programme in Cuba. At PIM, each home visitor is in charge of 25 families – including those with pregnant women or children aged 0–6 years – and visits five families per day, so every family is visited once a week until the child is 6 years old. The home visitors must have completed high school, and are specifically trained in the skills and competences they require; most are primary school teachers. Their role is to educate families to care for their children better, and to serve as a link between the families and the social services available to them. It's a decentralised programme: the state coordinates, and the municipality implements.

We created PIM 10 years ago, and it has reached over 60% of the poorest families in the state – that's over 100,000 children. It has also inspired other programmes in other areas of the country, including Rio de Janeiro and some municipalities of São Paulo. The national Ministry of Health considers PIM as a model for activities that it is planning to implement within *Brasil Carinhoso*.

During those 10 years, the programme has survived three changes of government in the state. This is a sign of political sustainability, as is the fact that the programme remains widely popular – although there is always a risk of interruption, which is why I would still prefer a federal law to be created, to guarantee the sustainability of these programmes where they exist,



'We are seeking to create a new legal framework in Brazil to address young children – a framework that can guide municipalities and states in improving the quality of children's first years.' – Osmar Terra. Photo • Courtesy International Seminar on a Legal Framework for Early Childhood

and to expand them into municipalities where they do not yet exist.

What are PIM's main achievements, and its most important success factors?

PIM has undergone a randomised evaluation, and among the findings were that children who participated for more than 2 years started primary school with a broader vocabulary than a control group of non-participants. Even more important, in my view, as it is a basis for all future learning, is how PIM promotes the socio-emotional development of children – when young children interact well with their caregivers, they will be self-confident and ready to explore the world.

As for success factors, any early childhood programme depends on the quality of human resources. We need more specialised early years professionals, properly educated and with formally recognised qualifications. That is one of the aims of the bill we are working on.

What are the most important strategies in moving the early learning agenda forward politically?

It is important to demonstrate the importance of the issue to political leaders. Once they are confronted with the science and the evidence, it is difficult for them to avoid considering it. For example, we organised for the Ministers of Education, Health and Social Development to meet with James Heckman, the Nobel-prizewinning

economist who has done much work on the costs and benefits of early childhood programmes, and other researchers. We can already see that this meeting has had positive effects on the way these ministers talk about early childhood.

At the moment, there are 22 members of the Brazilian parliament who have taken a short course at Harvard on early childhood. They are drawn from a range of political parties. Building the capacity of a critical mass of influential people is critical, in my view, to having the ability to influence policy.

There are other factors. Brazil is a big country, and quick progress depends on collaboration from all sectors. One of the debate sessions during the seminar, for example, featured entrepreneurs discussing what role they can play in the development of policies to support families. It's important to keep a dialogue flowing naturally among the government, the private sector, international organisations and foundations. It's also crucial to know how to handle the media, which play a key role in spreading the message and building public support.

What are the chances of getting the new statute passed?

I am very confident that, by the end of this year, we will have succeeded. Brazil will have a solid body of forward-looking laws on early childhood that can serve as a lead and inspiration for other Latin American countries.