




## PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A DISCUSSION ABOUT ITS PEDAGOGICAL ROLE

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### ABSTRACT

Play is one of the most important activities in early childhood education, playing a central role in the integral development of children. Through play, children can explore the world around them, experience new situations, learn to deal with rules, develop creativity, and build cognitive, emotional, and social skills. In this sense, the objective of this article is to analyze the pedagogical role of play in early childhood education, discussing how it contributes to the integral development of the child. From the results, we observed a comprehensive reflection on the importance of playing in early childhood education, highlighting its pedagogical function and its impact on the integral development of the child, as well as the theoretical conceptions arising from the currents of thought of reference authors in the area, mainly Piaget (1978), Vygotsky (2007) and Brougère (1998), among others. Finally, we suggest the need for more research on play in different educational contexts with future studies that can broaden the understanding of how play can be used in different cultures, environments, and teaching methodologies; and on the impact of play on the learning of children with different profiles and needs.

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Education. Joke. Teacher-Mediator. Pedagogical Practice.

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## INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is the initial phase of basic education, being a fundamental stage for the integral development of the child (Libâneo, 2003). In this stage, which covers the first years of life, the child experiences the first social and cognitive experiences outside the family environment, which has a great impact on their development. According to the National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC), early childhood education is fundamental for the formation of values, skills and competencies that support future learning (Brasil, 2017). Thus, the pedagogical practices adopted during this period are essential to promote the physical, cognitive, emotional and social development of the child.

One of the main resources used in early childhood education is play, which, in addition to being an activity inherent to childhood, has significant pedagogical value (Kramer, 2006). However, play is often undervalued in the school context, being seen as something separate from the formal learning process. This view, common in some educational approaches, disregards the potential that play has as a means of development and learning. According to Kishimoto (2011a), play is a way of expression and interaction of the child with the world and with himself, being fundamental for the construction of meanings and for the development of imagination, creativity and socialization. However, in many school contexts, there is still resistance to considering it an effective pedagogical strategy, which generates a dissociation between playing and formal learning.

The methodology adopted for the construction of this article includes a literature review of the main theories that discuss the role of play in child development and a qualitative analysis of the effects of this practice on the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of children. The research focuses on the survey of theoretical sources of authors such as Piaget (1978), Vygotsky (2007) and Brougère (1998), as well as recent studies that address the relationship between play and learning in early childhood education.

The justification for this study is based on the need to discuss and understand play as an essential pedagogical strategy for early childhood education, in the light of theories that value the integral development of the child. Play is an activity that allows children to explore the world around them in a playful and creative way, while building knowledge and skills. In addition, playing favors the development of social, emotional and cognitive skills, providing a rich and meaningful learning environment (Vygotsky, 2007).

Therefore, the objective of this article is to analyze the pedagogical role of play in early childhood education, discussing how it contributes to the integral development of the child. In this way, it seeks to demonstrate that playing is not a secondary activity, but an



essential practice for the construction of knowledge and the development of important life skills. From this analysis, it is expected that the article will contribute to a greater appreciation of play as a pedagogical tool, encouraging teachers and educators to integrate it in a planned and conscious way in the school routine.

## **THE CONCEPT OF PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

Play, since time immemorial, has always been a fundamental practice in children's lives, and its importance has been recognized in different cultural and historical contexts around the world (Oliveira, 2012). In antiquity, although there were no systematized studies on early childhood education, the act of playing was already a practice observed in several societies as a form of physical and social development (Craidy; Kaercher, 2001). However, it was only from the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century that play began to be formally recognized as a pedagogical tool in early childhood education (Oliveira, 2012).

In Europe, the Industrial Revolution caused greater urbanization and the creation of schools for young children, which gave rise to the discussion about the best way to educate them. In this context, the German educator Friedrich Froebel, founder of the first kindergarten in 1837, was a pioneer in arguing that play is essential for children's development (Kishimoto, 2011a). Froebel believed that through playful activities, children express their creativity and develop cognitive and motor skills. He introduced the concept of "kindergarten" as a space where play was an integral part of education (Wallon, 1978).

Between the 1930s and 1970s, play was still marginalized in educational practices, often being seen as a distraction or waste of time. It was only in the 1980s, with the advancement of research on psychology and child development, that playing began to be understood as an essential part of the teaching-learning process (Kishimoto, 2011b).

The concept of play varies according to theoretical and pedagogical approaches. Three of the main thinkers who reflected on play in the context of early childhood education were Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and Friedrich Froebel. Jean Piaget (1896-1980), in his theory of cognitive development, considers play as a form of assimilation of reality. For Piaget (1998), the child, when playing, is mentally and physically repeating what he has already learned, adjusting his ideas to the new experience, which he calls "assimilation". He classifies games into three types: exercise games, symbolic games and rule games, corresponding to different stages of the child's development.

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), in turn, emphasizes the role of culture and social interaction in the development of the child. For him, playing is an essentially social and



cultural activity, which promotes the development of higher psychological functions, such as imagination, memory and abstract thinking (Vygotsky, 1984). Play, according to Vygotsky (1984), is the place where the child begins to exercise what he calls a "symbolic function", that is, the ability to attribute meanings to objects and actions that go beyond their immediate use. Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), as mentioned, was one of the first to systematize the idea that play has an intrinsic educational value. He believed that playful activity allows children to explore the world around them, developing their sensory perception and cognitive skills through interaction with the environment and with other children (Wallon, 1978).

In the context of early childhood education, it is common to distinguish between free play and structured play, both of which have different contributions to children's development. Free play refers to the playful activity that is initiated and conducted by the child himself, without the direct intervention of the adult. In this modality, the child is free to explore his own ideas and interests, which promotes the development of autonomy, creativity and the ability to make decisions (Kishimoto, 2011b). According to Vygotsky (1984), it is during free play that the child uses the imagination to solve problems and explore social roles, contributing to cognitive and emotional development.

Structured play, on the other hand, is organized by an adult, such as the teacher, with a defined pedagogical objective (Kishimoto, 2011b). This type of play can include games with rules and directed activities, such as construction workshops or cognitive challenges, and are useful for the development of specific skills, such as problem solving, respect for rules, and cooperation (Piaget, 1998). Piaget believed that rule play is essential for the development of logic and the ability to follow social norms.

According to Craidy and Kaercher (2001), both types of play are important in the educational environment. While free play promotes creativity and autonomy, structured play can help children develop more specific skills and work in groups, under the supervision and guidance of the teacher. In this sense, pedagogical planning must include in the educational environment a practice that involves both resources to promote the social and inclusive development of the child.

## **THE ROLE OF PLAY IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT**

Wajskop (2011) states that play is a central activity in childhood, playing a fundamental role in the integral development of the child. During the first years of life, children build and organize their world through playful activities, and it is from these interactions that they advance in various areas of development (Oliveira, 2012). In the

context of early childhood education, play is not only a form of entertainment, but also a pedagogical tool that boosts cognitive, social, emotional, and motor development.

Play promotes cognitive development by stimulating abstract thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills. According to Piaget (1978), playing is essential for the development of intelligence, since it allows the child to experiment, test hypotheses and learn through trial and error. Symbolic games, in which children pretend, act in the construction of cognitive skills, as they require the child to mentally represent objects and situations that are not physically present (Piaget, 1978).

Vygotsky (2007) reinforces this perspective by stating that, through play, children expand their imagination and symbolic thinking capacities, allowing them to transcend the limitations of their immediate reality and explore new cognitive possibilities. Social interaction during play is also an opportunity for the development of language and communication, essential factors in the learning process.

From a social point of view, group play provides children with the opportunity to interact with others, learning social norms, cooperation, and conflict resolution (Oliveira, 2012). Thus, when sharing toys and participating in collective playful activities, children experience the need to follow rules, respect the turn of their peers and negotiate to achieve common goals, and these experiences are fundamental for the development of social skills that will be important throughout life (Rocha, 1999).

Play, in this sense, also contributes to the development of empathy and the ability to put oneself in the other's shoes. Vygotsky (2007) argues that the social development of children is directly related to their ability to interact with the environment and with other children, and playing creates the ideal environment for these interactions to occur in a natural and meaningful way. Through play, children have the opportunity to express and regulate their emotions in a healthy way, so that the playful activity serves as a channel for the child to externalize their feelings, whether they are joy, frustration or fear (Pinheiro; Pinto, 2008). In addition, Oliveira (2012) points out that playing helps in the development of self-esteem and self-confidence, since when facing and overcoming playful challenges, the child feels more competent and capable.

Bruner (1976) points out that playing allows children to experience different roles and emotional situations, which favors the development of the ability to deal with complex emotions, thus, when experiencing make-believe, children have the chance to explore and understand their own feelings, in addition to developing the emotional resilience necessary to face frustrations and challenges.



Motor development is also intensely benefited by play, especially through physical activities that involve running, jumping, climbing, and manipulating objects (Silva, 2013). Outdoor play or those that involve the use of various materials helps with gross motor coordination, while activities that require manual dexterity, such as fitting or drawing games, promote fine motor coordination (Wajskop, 1996).

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that preschoolers engage in regular physical activity to promote physical health and proper motor development (WHO, 2020). Play, therefore, offers children a natural and pleasurable context to develop their motor skills, which contributes to their autonomy and independence. It also facilitates the construction of knowledge, since children learn best through active experience, that is, play offers a safe environment for experimentation and exploration of the world, enabling children to create, test and modify their hypotheses (Wajskop, 1996). According to Dewey (1959), knowledge is built from experience, and play provides children with the opportunity to explore the physical and social world in a practical and meaningful way.

Vygotsky (2007) adds that playing is directly linked to the zone of proximal development, that is, to the distance between what the child already knows how to do on his own and what he can learn with the help of an adult or more experienced peers. In this sense, during play, the adult or the teacher can act as a mediator, helping the child to overcome challenges and build new knowledge. In addition to the cognitive, social, emotional and motor aspects, play plays an important role in the behavioral development of students in early childhood education (Oliveira, 2012). The author reiterates that in the act, for example, of participating in games with rules, children learn to deal with limits and respect established norms, so that these experiences are fundamental for the development of self-discipline and the ability to self-regulate.

For Wajskop (1996), play, therefore, not only entertains, but also teaches the child fundamental behaviors for life in society, such as patience, cooperation and peaceful resolution of conflicts. When playing in a group, children develop negotiation skills and learn to deal with frustrations in a healthy way. According to Kramer (2006), the school playful environment offers children a behavioral preparation for future challenges, such as living in a group and complying with social rules.

## **HISTORICAL-CULTURAL THEORY AND PLAY**

The historical-cultural theory, developed by Lev S. Vygotsky, highlights the importance of social interactions and cultural context in the cognitive and emotional development of individuals (Elkonin, 2009). According to this perspective, human



development does not occur in isolation, but is mediated by culture and the symbolic tools that society offers, such as language, art, and, in particular, play. The learning process, in this theory, is seen as a social construction, where the interactions between the child and his environment, especially with adults or more experienced peers, play a central role in the internalization of knowledge and skills (Vygotsky, 2007).

Vygotsky (2007) suggests that children construct knowledge through processes of symbolic mediation, where the role of adults and culture is crucial for the development of higher psychological functions, such as thought, language and memory. These social interactions are fundamental for the child to advance in his development, promoting the so-called "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), which is the distance between what the child can do alone and what he can do with the help of a more experienced other (Vygotsky, 1998).

In the context of historical-cultural theory, play occupies a central role in child development, being seen by Vygotsky as one of the main means for the child to internalize the social and cognitive rules of the adult world. According to the author, play is essential for the development of imagination and symbolic thinking, two fundamental aspects for the formation of higher psychological functions (Vygotsky, 2007).

Play, particularly pretend play, is seen by Vygotsky as a privileged form of symbolic activity, in which children can transcend the limitations of the physical world and explore cultural rules and norms in a safe environment. By playing symbolically, children learn to deal with meanings, social rules, and abstract concepts. Vygotsky (2007) states that play creates a zone of proximal development of the child, because by imitating adult roles or fictitious situations, the child practices and develops skills that are beyond his immediate capabilities.

In play, there is a reorganization of psychological functions: the child learns to act according to internal rules, such as when a child pretends to be an adult and acts according to the social expectations of this role, even without fully understanding its implications. In this sense, symbolic play is essential for the development of self-regulation, an important step in cognitive and social development (Elkonin, 2009).

In addition to Vygotsky, other authors who study or base their theories on the historical-cultural perspective have contributed to the deepening of the understanding of the role of play in child development. Luria (1986), for example, one of Vygotsky's main collaborators, emphasized the importance of symbolic activities in the formation of higher psychological functions, emphasizing that the game not only reflects culture, but also acts



as a space where the child learns to master cultural tools, such as language and writing (Luria, 1986).

Elkonin (2009) has conducted studies on the role of pretend play in child development and developed a systematic approach to understand how different forms of play contribute to cognitive development. He proposes that the symbolic game promotes the development of mental operations, being a space for experimentation where children simulate and internalize social and cognitive rules, preparing themselves for formal learning (Elkonin, 2009).

For Bruner (1976), who also studied the importance of play from a cultural and social perspective, playing offers children the opportunity to "experiment with hypotheses" about the world around them, in an environment free of real risks. He argues that play is a way to test and refine one's understanding of the social world, promoting not only cognitive development but also adaptation to complex social rules (Bruner, 1976).

As noted, these authors, in some way influenced by Vygotsky's work, reinforce the idea that play is not an isolated act of fun, but an essential component of child development, a process by which the child appropriates the symbolic world and the cultural norms that regulate life in society. Elkonin (2009) observes that the Vygotskian perspective on play emphasizes its role as an important mediator in the development of higher psychological functions. The act of playing, especially in symbolic activities, the child transcends immediate reality and begins to operate at a more advanced level of development, practicing cognitive, social and emotional skills that will be essential for his future as a culturally integrated human being.

## **PLAY AS A PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE: REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN THE MEDIATION OF PLAY**

The teacher assumes a fundamental role in the mediation of play, acting as a facilitator and stimulator of children's experiences. According to Vygotsky (1991), pedagogical mediation is essential for learning, and the teacher is responsible for promoting interactions that expand children's development. Prange and Bragagnolo (2012) observe that the educator must carefully observe the games and, without interfering in an invasive way, must encourage creativity and critical reasoning. This mediation occurs in a dialogical way, allowing the child to be active in the process of knowledge construction.

Integrating play into the early childhood education curriculum is essential to ensure that learning occurs in a meaningful and enjoyable way. According to the National Curriculum Reference for Early Childhood Education (Brasil, 1998), playing should be



recognized as an essential activity for child development, permeating all areas of knowledge. When play is planned as an integral part of the curriculum, it provides children with the opportunity to explore the world, solve problems and express feelings, developing a series of cognitive and emotional skills (Silva; Pinheiro, 2006).

Symbolic, rule, and make-believe games play a crucial role in children's cognitive development (Silva, 2013). The symbolic game, for example, according to Piaget (1978), is an activity that allows the child to transform reality and experiment with new social roles, developing his capacity for abstraction. Rule games, on the other hand, help children understand notions of cooperation, limits and self-control, which is essential for the formation of a more organized and rational thought (Silva; Pinheiro, 2006).

Make-believe games, in turn, are fundamental for the development of abstract thinking and problem solving. Playing "make-believe" involves the symbolic representation of reality, which, according to Vygotsky (1991), promotes the development of imagination and creative thinking. Thus, children learn to deal with complex issues in a playful and pleasurable way.

In the socio-emotional aspect, playing is a powerful tool for the development of social and emotional skills. By interacting with peers, the child learns to communicate, negotiate and share, developing empathy and cooperation (Prange; Bragagnolo, 2012). According to Winnicott (1975), playing is essential for the construction of subjectivity, since the child finds in playing a safe space to express his feelings and understand the emotions of others. Play is, therefore, a way to socialize, allowing children to learn to deal with conflicts, solve interpersonal problems and respect differences.

As Rocha (1999) argues, games also play a central role in children's motor development, especially when they involve activities that require body movement. Games such as running, jumping, and climbing help develop gross motor coordination, while finer activities such as drawing, assembling blocks, or manipulating small objects improve fine motor coordination. According to Gallahue and Ozmun (2005), the practice of motor activities in childhood is fundamental for physical development, providing children with the control and dexterity necessary for more complex future interactions.

The playful character of play is also important for the development of children in the learning process. Playing stimulates curiosity, imagination and autonomy, key elements for cognitive and emotional development. According to Kishimoto (2011a), playfulness has the power to captivate children's attention, making learning more meaningful and pleasurable. In this way, playing, in addition to being a child's right, is also an effective strategy to promote learning in a contextualized and active way.

In order for play to be effectively integrated into the pedagogical process, it is necessary for the teacher to plan playful activities that are aligned with the learning objectives (Gallahue; Ozmun, 2005). This planning should consider the stages of children's development and provide a variety of games that meet the different areas of knowledge. According to Oliveira (2012), the teacher must create environments that stimulate imagination, curiosity and social interaction, offering diversified materials and spaces that allow exploration.

The observation of the games allows the teacher to understand the development process of each child. This practice must be accompanied by specific pedagogical interventions, in which the educator acts as a facilitator, promoting learning without compromising children's autonomy (Oliveira, 2012). For Vygotsky (1991), the teacher's intervention is fundamental for the child to be able to advance in the zone of proximal development, that is, in activities that he or she is not yet able to perform on his own, but that he or she can learn with adequate support.

According to Gallahue and Ozmun (2005), the act of playing can also be an evaluation instrument, that is, through the observation of games, the teacher can identify the skills acquired by children, as well as the areas that need greater pedagogical support. According to Oliveira (2012), evaluation in the context of early childhood education should be continuous and procedural, considering the child's integral development. Play, in this sense, offers the educator a window to observe cognitive, motor and socio-emotional development in a natural and contextualized way.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The article presented a comprehensive reflection on the importance of play in early childhood education, highlighting its pedagogical function and its impact on the integral development of the child. We saw that play, far beyond being a recreational activity, is a fundamental practice for the cognitive, socio-emotional and motor development of children. By playing, the child learns to solve problems, interact socially, control their movements and express their emotions. These learnings occur in a natural, contextualized and meaningful way, strengthening the child's integral development.

The teacher, as a mediator and planner of playful activities, plays a central role in promoting play as a pedagogical practice. He must be able to create environments that encourage play, carefully observing children's interactions and intervening carefully to promote more complex learning. From the planning of activities that integrate play into the curriculum, the educator ensures that the cognitive and socio-emotional development of



children is stimulated and ensures that these learnings are built in an autonomous and creative way.

As observed, there is an importance of play as a pedagogical strategy in early childhood education. Playfulness is an ally in the teaching and learning process, as it promotes children's active engagement, stimulates curiosity, and strengthens motivation to learn. In addition, play is a privileged space for the construction of essential skills, such as problem solving, cooperation, empathy and autonomy.

Finally, we suggest the need for more research on play in different educational contexts with future studies that can broaden the understanding of how play can be used in different cultures, environments, and teaching methodologies; and on the impact of play on the learning of children with different profiles and needs. It is also salutary that educational policies value play more, recognizing it as a central pedagogical strategy and ensuring that there is adequate space and time for it to occur in everyday school life.

Thus, we hope that this article will contribute to the reflection on the importance of play in early childhood education and to the strengthening of pedagogical practices that integrate play in a meaningful way to children's development and learning.



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