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FIELD STUDY ON FREE PLAY AS AN ENHANCER OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the contribution of spontaneous play to the construction of children's autonomy. For this, a qualitative study of the microethnography type was carried out with six children, five boys and one girl, aged between two and three years belonging to a kindergarten 1 class, of an early childhood education school, were observed for 4 months, daily. From the participant observation, 03 (three) thematic categories emerged: the importance of the organization of spaces as a facilitating agent of free play; free play and interactions between children and free play and the development of autonomy. The results showed that the organization of spaces interferes with free play and the development of the child's autonomy; that when playing freely, children enhance symbolic play, assume roles and interact spontaneously, and when children play freely, they develop in their entirety, learning to think, question, discover, explore, experience new discoveries. These factors are essential for the integral growth and construction of children's autonomy through actions in free play.

Keywords: Child. Play. Autonomy.

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INTRODUCTION

> God is joy. A child is joy.
> God and a child have this in common: they both
> They know that the universe is a box of toys.
> God sees the world with the eyes of a child.
> He is always looking for companions to play with.
> Rubem Alves

The importance of understanding the meaning of play for the child and for the construction of their autonomy arises from the moment childhood begins to have different meanings in society. Over the centuries, the portrait of childhood has changed, and different childhoods have been perceived. The child went from being a mini-adult to a vulnerable being and should be protected and consequently led to later exercise his role as a historical and capable being (Ariès, 1981).

The child plays to understand the world and participate in it, plays house, dolls, plays imitation games. Through sensory and exploratory play, she gets to know the physical environment that surrounds her and her role in it. When playing with handicrafts, with songs and cirandas, the child gets to know the culture of his social group (Brasil, 2019).

Playing is a right guaranteed by law and defended by the United Nations (UN) since 1959, in the Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child. This was strengthened in 1989 with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Brazil is a party. In Brazil, play is guaranteed in the Federal Constitution (1988), in the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (1990) and in the Legal Framework for Early Childhood (2016).

Children are unaware that playing stimulates their cognitive and motor learning, favoring greater interaction with the environment in which they live, they want to play (Kishimoto, 2011). By playing freely and spontaneously, she expresses herself, builds her identity, develops socio-affective aspects and perceives her place in the world (Chicon; Olive tree; Rocha, 2019). Heuristic play, better known as free play, is a playful activity, free of rules or impositions. Children have the opportunity to explore their creativity within their own time, create rules in their games and bonds of friendship with other children without the intervention of an adult, in order to better integrate with the environment and in the environment in which they are inserted (Penina, 2016).

The dimension of freedom seen as a characteristic of the authentic nature of play is developed by Caillois (1967), who argues that playing should be a free and voluntary activity, therefore, it cannot be imposed, but carried out for the mere pleasure of doing it;

separated from ordinary life and crossed by a feeling of fantasy that keeps it distinct from what really happens (Savio, 2023).

Understanding the different languages of the child, and respecting the time of each one is fundamental for their development, not requiring all children to perform the same activity at the same time, leaving them free to explore the environment, interact with peers, the teacher, the materials, this is the role of the teacher. The attentive look, observing that the child also communicates through gestures, looks, bodily and sensitive and active listening, establishing a dialogue with the child, making him feel valued, will strengthen the bond, increase trust with the teacher, enabling the child to develop autonomously.

There are still schools with the thought that the child should play, but always under the direction of an adult or teacher, mentioning free play, as a messy situation, with children running around the room, without any direction, or sitting on the floor with several random toys around them.

At times, children need the figure of the teacher to feel safe, and the teacher needs to have an attentive eye, because during the game, the needs of the group and the child individually are revealed. Thus, even during free play, the figure of the teacher is important, whether in the organization of the space, in the choice of materials, and in the interpretation of what the child is expressing.

Organizing an environment that is welcoming, safe and, at the same time, that allows exploration and discovery is paramount for the child. Early Childhood Education institutions must both offer a clean and safe space, aimed at ensuring child health, and organize themselves with welcoming, challenging and inclusive environments, full of interactions, explorations and discoveries shared with other children and with the teacher (Opinion CNE/CEB 20/2009). Observing the spaces of daycare centers and preschools, as well as reflecting on them, helps to understand the child's place in society.

Lopes mentions that:

> Playing is one of the fundamental activities for the development of identity and autonomy. The fact that the child, from a very early age, can communicate through gestures, sounds and later, play a certain role in the game, makes him develop his imagination. In play, children can develop some important skills, such as attention, imitation, memory, imagination. Some socialization capacities also mature, through interaction, use and experimentation with rules and social roles (2006, p.110).

The very young child (19 months to 3 years and 11 months) is in the pre-operational stage, according to Piaget (1964), where egocentrism and playing loaded with symbolism

predominate. Pretend play will play an important role for the child, allowing him to relive situations that may have caused enormous joy or anxiety, fear or anger, being able, in the magical and relaxed situation of the game, to express and work on these emotions that are very strong or difficult to bear. It is during this period that there is a need to use concrete objects with a symbolic character. For Kishimoto (1994), the toy is related to an image, which can be used as he wishes by the child. A simple pot, for example, becomes a pot for the child who at that moment is imagining himself cooking. She has the pot as an object, but in her imagination she visualizes this object as a pot.

Thus, it is through play that the child discovers the world, exercises his imagination, learns rules and limits, learns about respect and empathy. "Playing spontaneously allows the child to be led to an imaginary sphere, a world of conscious make-believe, but capable of reproducing the relationships he observes in his daily life, symbolically experiencing different roles, exercising his ability to generalize and abstract." (Melo, Valle, 2005, p. 45).

Based on the above, the following research question was formulated: What is the contribution of free play to the construction of the child's autonomy?

The general objective of the study was to investigate the contribution of spontaneous play to the construction of the child's autonomy.

The specific objectives were: to carefully observe how the child expresses himself through spontaneous play; to actively listen to the children, stimulating dialogue and mutual respect so that they feel safe and develop; to organize the spaces in a playful way in order to stimulate situations in which the child can create, discover and exercise his creative side.

METHOD AND PROCEDURES

> Playing is the work of childhood
> Piaget

DESIGN

This research has a qualitative approach, descriptive in relation to the objectives, field in relation to the place of data collection, with a microethnographic design.

For Denzin and Lincoln (2006), qualitative research encompasses an approach that interprets the world, and seeks to understand what is observed, bringing meanings to what is being observed. According to Vergara (2000), descriptive studies show the particularities of a specific population or phenomenon, establishing connections between variables. The author also mentions that the purpose of the research is not necessarily to explain the phenomena described, although it can serve as a basis for such explanations. For Lakatos

and Marconi (2001), in field research, the researcher observes the facts and phenomena as they occur spontaneously, during data collection, in the natural environment of the one being researched. Ethnography can be a methodological alternative for educational research, seeking to

> [...] describe, understand and interpret the educational phenomena that take place in the school context. It is evident that it is always linked to theory and description through a holistic, naturalistic and inductivist view, which characterizes the approach in question (Engers, 1994, p. 67).

The microethnographic design or context analysis, according to Creswell (2010) focuses on one of the aspects of culture, where the organization of events is socially constructed, seeking this construction in the expressions and gestures of the participants.

INTRODUCING THE PARTICIPANTS

According to the National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC, 2017), early childhood education is organized into three age groups: babies (zero to 18 months), very young children (19 months to 3 years and 11 months) and young children (4 years to 5 years and 11 months). In the present study, six children from the age group classified as very young children, five boys and one girl, aged between two and three years, belonging to a kindergarten 1 class of an early childhood education school, participated. The six children have been in this school since nursery, so they are already well acquainted with the school environment in which they are inserted (Brasil, 2017).

According to Piaget (1964), children between two and three years old are in the pre-operational stage, so named because it is the phase in which children create new meanings for situations that were previously confusing. It is in this period that they begin their verbal development, beginning to use symbols to express themselves (Rappaport, 1981). This phase is also well known for self-centeredness, where children feel the center of attention, having difficulties in sharing toys, and have their own vision of understanding the world (La Taille, 1992).

Therefore, around the age of two, children's thoughts meet language, and their brain development evolves, and the way of expression that was previously through gestures and cries, is transformed into words, starting language, an advance that also covers some cognitive processes such as perception, imagination, attention and memory. Vygotsky (2007) says that "it is through the toy that the child reaches a functional definition of concepts or objects, and the words become part of something concrete".

For Vygotsky (1998), the development of children between two and three years of age is fundamental for the formation of their cognitive and social capacities. To better understand this development, we need to take into account the reality that each one lives, and the incentives to which they are exposed or not. Their progress is linked to how they are motivated or not, and their interests evolve, with the interest of a five-year-old being different from the interest of a two-year-old. The child between two and three years old wants things to happen immediately, not having the maturity to wait yet, the same occurs in the act of playing, as it is the phase where they are still egocentric. In Piaget's view (1964) this happens due to the lack of notion of the self. Children's thinking is confused in the pre-operational period because everything is very concrete for them and so the child focuses on material objects (Papalia, 2006).

The act of playing therefore offers a solid basis for development. During the process of the world of make-believe and fantasy, the creation of various possibilities that children create when playing constitute new skills that will be used by them throughout their childhood, whether in the school space or in society itself.

SITUATING THE FIELD OF INVESTIGATION

The early childhood education school is a private school and is located in the center of the city of Alegrete, serving full-time, with mixed classes in the morning and in the afternoon classes of nursery 1 and 2, kindergarten 1, kindergarten 2, level A and B. Each class has a regent teacher and an assistant. The group that was observed for the data collection of this research was the one from kindergarten 1, where I worked as an assistant.

Thus, the teaching staff is composed of 6 pedagogues, where each one has her assistant, totaling 11 professionals. Of these 6 teachers, one of them is the psychopedagogue who meets the demands of the specialized educational service room (AEE). In the SEA room there are toys and resources adapted for children with disabilities, while in the toys in the square and *playground,* there are no toys adapted for children with disabilities. The school management is composed of a principal, educational supervisor and pedagogical coordinator.

The school's physical space is large, with a patio, a square with sand and toys, an indoor and outdoor playground, a specialized educational service room (AEE) and a toy library. The school has seven (7) classrooms, two bathrooms, one for the use of teachers and adults, and another for the use of children, with a baby changing room for nursery and kindergarten 1 babies who use diapers, there is also a pantry and a kitchen for adult use, the school does not have a cafeteria, children have snacks in the classroom.

THE COLLECTION OF THE DATA GENERATED

The data collection instruments used were participant observation, recording through photos and video, as well as conversations and exchanges with the children. The field notes were typed on the cell phone, used as a "field diary".

Bogdan and Biklen (1999) describe the field notes as reports written by the researcher about what he heard, saw, experienced and thought during the course of the research. In the records made, we sought to detail the events, to quickly describe what the children said. The notes were important to record impressions quickly as well as interpretations.

To observe is "to perceive the activities and interrelationships of people in the field setting, through the researcher's five senses" (Angrosino, 2009, p.56), and participant observation occurs when the researcher is completely immersed in the social context of the observed (Sampieri, Collado and Lucio, 2006). It is believed that only in this way would it be possible to perceive, reflect and understand how spontaneous play is organized among children, observing and participating in the reality of these children who talked not only through speech, but also through gesture, facial expression, body language.

The photographic record allowed situations not perceived *in loco* to be revealed later in the photographs. By using photography, we sought to have one more element for the registration of gestures, looks and moods of the children. "One of the potentialities of photography is its ability to highlight a particular aspect of a situation that is diluted in a vast field of vision, thus making explicit the singularity and transcendence of a scene" (Guran, 2012).

Video was an important resource as it made it possible to capture situations that occurred simultaneously in the same space and at the same time. When filming a specific child, this research teacher, when reviewing the video, often noticed even more interesting events occurring in parallel than the one she intended to film.

2.5 PROCEDURES

The data were collected from March to June 2023, with a frequency of five times a week, and lasting 50 minutes each observation session. In total, there were 80 sessions observed, approximately 78 hours of observation.

The first month was dedicated to observing the space, how the materials are arranged and distributed in the environment, the degree of autonomy that the children had over these objects, that is, if the toys were within their reach or if they needed the teacher's help to access them, as well as the time available for spontaneous play.

In the second month, the focus was directed to observing how the children interacted, whether they played alone or with the other children, whether there was adult intervention in the game, and observing whether the child, even during free play, looked at the teacher in need of approval about her activity.

In the following two months, we sought to understand how free play could enhance the development of these children's autonomy. What exchanges children make with each other, the type of language they use to talk, develop and expand their creative potential; how they manifest the imagination in this phase in which playing is predominantly symbolic for the child.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to investigate the contribution of spontaneous play to the construction of children's autonomy. For this, a research with a qualitative approach was carried out, where six children, five boys and one girl, aged between two and three years old, belonging to a kindergarten 1 class, from an early childhood education school, were observed, photographed and filmed with full consent. In total, there were 80 (eighty) observation sessions, in the afternoon shift, resulting in approximately 78 hours of participant observation. Through these observations, 03 (three) thematic categories emerged: 1) The importance of the organization of spaces as a facilitating agent of free play; 2) Free play and interactions between children; 3) Free play and the development of autonomy.

It is important to note that this researcher investigated her own practice since she worked at the school and in particular with the researched class. In addition, he was responsible for being with the children during the period in which they played freely. Lima and Nacarato (2009) also investigated the practice itself and concluded that it is "knowledge in action, integrating theory and practice, and constructed locally, enabling the movement between the singular of each teacher and the plural of the community of teachers who investigate their own practice" (p. 246). The fact of working with the researched class itself allowed me to be already familiar with the children and, much more importantly, that the children were already comfortable with me. I tried to carry out a research that really gave visibility to the children, their speeches, their gestures, looks, actions, their play and even their absences. Initially it was more a task of self-observation than of observation of children, and I say this because I wanted in every way to report what I was really observing without the recurrent adult-centrism of research done with children. The concern was to maintain an attentive and sensitive look and listening, a true exercise of observation of the

children, their actions and reactions, their manifestations and interactions, participating and interacting with them.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ORGANIZATION OF SPACES AS A FACILITATING AGENT OF FREE PLAY

The children arrive at school at 1:30 p.m., and follow a routine, important for them to feel safe not only physically but also emotionally. Children guide themselves through the performance of activities, daily tasks, and when they are aware of what will happen, they develop the perception of time Souza (2013, p. 51) states that "(...) The sequence of activities allows the child to orient himself in space and time and to have opportunities to learn and develop, with practical experiences that stimulate autonomy and socialization (...).

This routine, that is, this organization of time that occurs daily, is the same for all classes and would be no different with the observed class: 1) children arrive at school; 2) the teachers receive the children at the door of the classroom: the moment of welcome takes place; 3) the children begin to pick up the toys available in the room, starting to play freely; 4) the teacher organizes the class to go to the playground to perform some directed or non-directed activity; 5th) when returning to the class, they do the hygiene and have the snack they take from home; 6) an activity is carried out and the child's construction is recorded; 7) The children are organized by the teachers to go home.

The spaces that the children observed had at their disposal to play freely were generally well-organized and clean (figure 1). Most of the time, the children used the classroom to play, which is a good size, taking into account that there were few children in the class. The room has two shelves with various toys available to children. Although it is a considerable amount of toys, they are well-organized, not causing any type of visual pollution.

Horn *et all.* (2014) point out that the way the classroom is organized informs about the real possibility of the child exercising the right to play, that is, a very tidy classroom would indicate that children do not express themselves, do not play and messy classrooms indicate that children are not responsible for tidying up.

Sometimes the children asked this research teacher for the toys that are in the last part of the shelf, because they could not reach it. However, most of the toys were within easy reach of the children. I immediately did not realize that in this regard I was not contributing to the autonomy of the little ones. When I realized, I could do nothing immediately because the school has an organization and I was simply a small part of a whole. In this phase of self-observation, I realized that the fact that the children did not

reach all the toys really bothered me. I felt as if I was contributing to their dependence and not autonomy. It was then that I began to observe which of the toys that were higher up, on the shelf, were the most requested and which toys for children's access were less used and I changed places.

Horn et. All (2014) pay attention to the classroom that has an exaggerated playful look, with so many offers of toys and games that children cannot assimilate and end up moving away from the material. This is not the case with the observed room, as already mentioned.

Often, early childhood education teachers face difficulties in having this attentive enough look to position themselves and meet the emerging demands of children. It is common for teachers to continue doing what is already customary, not meeting the needs that each class has, they are new children, new ways of acting and thinking about this has a crucial impact on the act of free play. (Dufour, 2005).

The issue of time in early childhood education is important, although for some time is only an organizer of daily life. According to Hoyuelos (2007), a temporal organization in schools has resulted in inflexible routines that in no way reflect the way children perceive time. This situation occurs because the way the school routine is often structured emphasizes an institutional time regulated by a pedagogy of activities (Fochi, 2014) because they are often standard activities, not giving due emphasis to the playful experiences that are lived collectively and individually by the children themselves.

It was and continues to be the concern of this research teacher to serve and understand each child and with this in mind I chronologically described some situations that occurred and were perceived as significant for the development of children's autonomy throughout the month of March 2023. We emphasize that children's names are fictitious names in order to preserve their identities.

Day 10/03/2023: This afternoon was very sunny so the head teacher of the class decided that free play would be held in the schoolyard. Even though it was outside, the patio, a large space, was previously organized with the arrangement of toys and rugs on the floor for children who liked to play sitting. The children were very excited when the free play time was held in the courtyard, as they had more space to explore with the toys, and could play games that involved running such as tag, for example.

On that day, the chosen toys were the motorcycles, and they were riding with them in circles making sounds imitating real motorcycles, imitating horns and noises of cars talking to each other as if they were in traffic. There was a situation in which Vitor, 3 years old, received a hit on the back of the motorcycle, from his colleague Gustavo, 2 years old. Vitor

showed that he was outraged by the situation by putting his hands on his head and saying: "*bah*", his colleague Gustavo apologized and the two talked in their own language, and continued to joke (Field diary).

Very young children still do not have well-developed linguistic and writing resources and thus express themselves through other languages such as movement, play, laughter, dance, dramatization, and imitating horns and car noises, simulating riding a real motorcycle were ways for these children to express themselves and communicate, exploring their creative potential and recognizing themselves as people.

It is important that children can exercise their bodies feeling safe and one way to provide security to the child is to plan the environment favoring the experimentation of their motor possibilities, providing opportunities for self-organization and providing well-being.

Brougére (2008) exposes that toys have a function of cultural value and have a wealth of meanings. Therefore, all the toys that are used by children during their spontaneous play have meanings and with the "motorcycles" it would be no different. The children felt as if they were adults on top of the toy. Perhaps they were reproducing situations already seen at another time.

Even if the toy does not seem to have a definitive function, when the child manipulates it freely without being bound by rules imposed by adults or models of use, "we can say that the function of the toy is play" (Brougére, 2008, p. 3). We agree with Vygotsky (1994) when he says that during play "the child behaves beyond the usual behavior of his age, beyond his daily behavior; in the toy, it is as if it were bigger than it really is" (p. 117).

Figure 1 Organization of the internal and external space



Source: Author's personal collection

03/15/2023: Rodrigo, 3 years old, asked the research teacher to take a box from the top of the bookshelf where there were some pieces of medium-sized *leggos* and various colors. The research teacher complied with the request and placed the box on top of the carpet. Classmates Liana, 3 years old, and Gustavo, 2 years old, seeing their classmate with the pieces on the carpet, approached and joined him. The boys built rockets with the *leggos* pieces and Liana built a castle with only the pink and lilac pieces they had available. I noticed that the way the box was arranged on the rug made the children more attracted to those pieces and at the same time comfortable because they were playing on top of the rug (Field diary).

The parallel game was evidenced, that is, the children played side by side, with each other without interacting socially, playing individually. Children sometimes play alone, sometimes they play in groups, sometimes they play in pairs. It is important that they have time to "think" on their own, to explore a toy without interference from their classmate.

Moreno (2007) emphasizes the importance of organizing the early childhood education room in order to make it an attractive and stimulating environment, well structured and welcoming, aiming at the acquisition of new knowledge and varied explorations. It is also important for the construction of the child's self-esteem and identity that he or she organizes the room himself after the game. Picking up a toy, playing and then putting it away, this whole organization system can be part of the game.

It is also worth emphasizing the need for professionals to be qualified to work with children, a teacher who is knowledgeable about the importance of spontaneous play and the preparation of the place where this play will be experienced and explored by the children will provide different interactions and investigations (Truccolo and Rosa, 2024). Freire (2002) exposes that the way in which the teacher environmentalizes the games makes a real difference in how children will proceed with free play. In this sense, the teacher must always be attentive to what is requested by the children during free play, knowing how to interpret the children's requests without interfering in the way they handle the materials (Monken, 2015).

03/31/2023: On this day there was something different in the room when the children arrived at the tables and chairs were not inside the classroom, as there was going to be a birthday at school and the tables were moved to the outside area. The first to arrive was 2-year-old Gustavo, soon after 3-year-old Vitor and 2-year-old Mario arrived, the three took the cars that were on the shelf and with the broom that is in the classroom, they made a track for the cars to pass over the broom, some pots formed the sides of the track.

With the arrival of their classmates Rodrigo, 3 years old, Liana 3 years old and Tiago 2 years old, the others stopped playing on the track they had built and started running all around the classroom. When her classmate Liana, 3 years old, took one of the pots that was serving as the side of the boys' car lane, and continued running, the others also went to the bookshelf and took a toy and each one continued running in a circle around the room. When Liana said "hid" out loud, the other classmates put the toy they had in their hands in front of their faces and stopped running, when the girl said "run", they kept running and stayed like that for a considerable period.

At that moment I realized that Liana, 3 years old, had influence over her classmates, because she had the initiative to create and lead the game all the time, which was a kind of hide and seek with tag.

Even though there was an agreement not to run in the classroom, the regent was only observing the children's action, because they were not just running for the sake of running, there was a meaning to the game, they had organized themselves with the leadership of a colleague and were following the commands she gave them (Field diary).

We agree with Alves (2022) when he says that it is part of the teacher's watchful eye to observe without intervening or judging children's play, except if a child is at risk. In addition, the space is a living environment, and can even say that it is an educational agent. When well organized, it promotes autonomy, curiosity, and the child's interest in acting and exploring.

When toys are organized at children's eye level, in boxes labeled with the names of the toys, they give children autonomy to pick them up, use them and then put them away. It is in this way that the child acquires responsibility for taking care of the object that is for collective use. The child's self-organization, in this process of picking up and storing the toy, contributes to his formation and becomes part of the game, in addition to gradually discovering the meaning of the words written on the boxes. In this context, the teacher's responsibility is to guide the child by indicating the toys that are scattered and where they should be stored, until the child acquires the habit of self-organization (Kishimoto and Freyberger, 2012).

It is often difficult for the adult who observes spontaneous play to understand that he should not interrupt children and their games. It is important to observe if playing is pleasurable for all children when they request the teacher's attention to something. (Goldschmied, Jackson, 2006). Thus, it is worth noting that the role of educators is mediation, no less important, but the protagonism must be played by the children (Piorski, 2016).

We understand that the arrangement of the materials, the way they are arranged in the room, interferes with the moment of free play. By having to request the material from the teacher, the child is deprived of recognizing himself as capable and independent of picking up the toy alone, delaying the development of autonomy.

FREE PLAY AND INTERACTIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN

The national curriculum reference for early childhood education (RCNEI) personal and social formation Brazil, 1998) is clear in stating that the construction of identity and autonomy are related to the child's socialization processes, and that when they occur, social interactions expand the affective bonds that children establish with other children and with adults. In the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI) we find that pedagogical practices should have interactions and play as guiding axes (Brasil, 2010). Thus, the importance given to interactions for the child's development and autonomy is observed in these documents.

There are numerous studies that emphasize the importance of interactions for the good development of the child, as well as free play as a facilitator of interactions between children. Truccolo and Rosa (2024) point out that it is through interactions during free play that children are able to develop understanding of various situations, understand and form opinions about themselves and others. (Truccolo and Rosa, 2024). Colchesqui (2015) reinforces that free play fosters interactions between children as well as the development of memory, language, perception and attention, all with affection and exchanges between children.

The role of the regent teacher is important for interactions to take place during free play, because when a place is thought of for the reality of the class and organized in a way that promotes spontaneous doing by children, without imposed rules, it favors the discoveries that will happen among peers (Perka and Sponchiado, 2023).

Teixeira *et all* (2020) point out that interactions between children deserve attention and appreciation by teachers during free play. The author refers that the situations that happen when peers interact through spontaneous games are also a way for teachers to get to know their students with another look.

The National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC), a guiding document for early childhood education, stresses the 'need for children to socialize with each other so that their knowledge is expanded and diversified, learning from each other'. (BNCC, 2017, p. 36).

04/05/2023: Gustavo, 2 years old, took a medium-sized dice that is on the shelf, and which has a drawing of an animal (cow, dog, cat, rabbit, chicken and frog) on each side.

Liana, 3 years old, seeing Gustavo with the dice (usually not used much at the time of free play by them) came closer and asked him what he was going to do. Gustavo replied that he would play and Liana was already taking the dice from his hands and throwing it up. When the dice fell, the figure of the frog was up, Liana said "*frog*" and Gustavo started to jump imitating a frog. Vitor (who doesn't have much oral language) seeing the reaction of his classmates joined the two and threw the dice once again, when he fell on the rabbit he jumped out imitating the animal. And so they went on for a considerable time, rolling the dice and imitating the falling animal. I found that even the initial idea of getting the dice was Gustavo's, it was Liana who led the game. Vitor, even with difficulty expressing himself, did the imitation correctly when Liana said the name of the animal. Everyone was able to understand each other well during the game, created their own order and way of communicating even if not always through speech, also used gestures and mimics (Field diary).

The child has many ways of communicating, whether through gestures, looks, even imitations. Speech is one of the forms, but a three-year-old child, who does not yet have refined linguistic resources, elaborates alternative forms. This demonstrates the ability of children to create situations in which they can express their desires, develop skills, or play.

The interactions that take place between children when they are playing freely institute their affective and social bonds, promoting some primordial skills that will help in adult life, because in addition to the pleasure of playing, there is also the perspective of the child's development (Padilha, Steidel, 2024).

Piaget (1978) sought to ascertain how children produce knowledge and interact, explaining that the characteristics of children's relationship with the environment depend on their stage of development.

04/17/2023: Upon arriving in the room, Tiago, 2 years old, non-verbal autistic, but who socializes with classmates in his own way, went directly to the shelf where most of the toys are, and picked up a phone. 3-year-old Liana arrived next. She understands the way Tiago jokes and expresses himself. He took another phone, put it to his ear and said: "*Hello*". Tiago dialed on the other cell phone expressing that he was calling Liana. Afterwards, the other classmates arrived and Gustavo, 2 years old, asked the teacher to take the toy from the clown's mouth, she complied with his request, he placed the object on top of a chair and the other classmates were arriving around him, even though the initiative to take the toy was Gustavo's who decided the order of who would go was Liana, talking to his colleagues and pointing out the order of each one. This toy had a small ball where they had to hit inside the character's mouth. Mario at one point wanted to go on the turn that

wasn't his, there was a disagreement between him Liana, and Mario moved away from the group of classmates going to another corner of the room, taking a motorcycle and started playing alone. The teacher did not intervene at the time of the disagreement of the colleagues, but she was attentive and observed, but there was no crying, they talked in their own way (Field diary).

Kishimoto (2021) says that the act of free play allows not only fun, but also communication and socialization, and it is not possible to think of a child without associating it with the act of playing. Vygotsky (1996) reminds us that playing is a social action for children, that when they play, they create an imaginary situation in which they assume a role, bringing with them rules of behavior from the places where they live. Therefore, free play is essential for children to understand the reality in which they are inserted.

In free play, children learn to make agreements with their peers, to wait their turn and to manage themselves. That is why playing makes the child learn to interact, socialize and live with other children (Truccolo and Rosa, 2024).

04/28/2023: Rodrigo and Liana 3 years old, Gustavo 2 years old picked up the unicorns and dinosaurs sat on the floor. The interaction between the three that I noticed was in relation to the sounds that each one made and the voice they gave to each animal: the boys were with the dinosaurs and Liana with the unicorns. What caught my attention was that Liana, while holding a unicorn in each of her hands and showing them to her two colleagues, made a sweet and soft voice to represent the animals that were in her hands. And the boys with the dinosaurs made a louder, deeper growling sound making their animals jump to the ground. (Field diary)

These interactions and dialogues that take place between children have an interconnection with the physical space in which the child is inserted, as it significantly influences the construction of make-believe and shapes how children conduct free play (Thelma Harms, 2009).

The child is the protagonist of his learning in the situations in which he interacts with colleagues, materials and the teacher, and the teacher's role is to mediate the child's experiments, enabling sensations and learning (Horn, 2017). The children interacted and learned. Even though it does not seem that the research teacher was mediating, the very act of planning and making the materials available is already a form of mediation.

The documents RCNEI Brasil, 1998) and DCNEI Brasil, 2010), bring the importance of play and interactions between children and with adults as well, as fundamental axes and estimate that playing should go hand in hand with the other learning processes present in early childhood education.

Callai, Maia, and Serpa (2022) bring the need to guarantee students pedagogical practices that are in line with normative documents such as the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education, where the interactions and games axis is considered essential for the children's learning process.

The Reggio Emilia approach considers that the individuality of children is important, but group cooperation should also be valued. Learning built in groups and mini-groups, through free play, is a driver of development and learning (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2016).

The approach to Italian education, called fields of experience, goes beyond the simple development of children. She also considers the impact of this growth both on the school community and on society (Santaiana, Silva, Gonçalves, 2021).

We found that when playing freely, children enhance symbolic play, assume roles and interact spontaneously, without needing the mediation of an adult. We evidence that on some occasions, when interacting, conflicts arise, and that at the age of three children are already able to manage and resolve such conflicts in order to continue the exercise of playing.

FREE PLAY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUTONOMY

Free play happens when the child uses simple objects available in everyday life. By manipulating these objects, the child has curiosity and creativity stimulated, finding new meanings for the toys and choosing those they consider the best. This process of free play helps in the development of children's autonomy (Alves, 2022).

Autonomy in early childhood education is essential for children to develop not only physically but also cognitively. Therefore, it is necessary to offer an environment in which they can experience situations appropriate for their age group, exercising their sense of initiative, being able to explain their curiosities and engage in new experiences such as choosing, deciding, creating new rules and ways of playing (Gallahue, Ozmun and Goodway, 2013).

05/02/2023: A group formed by Liana and Rodrigo 3 years old and Mario and Gustavo 2 years old, took the toys that are shaped like foods such as pizza, grapes and ice cream, and went to the toy stoves available in the living room, started playing restaurant where on one side of the stoves were the cooks Liana and Gustavo and on the other side representing the customers were Mario and Rodrigo. I realized that the one who organized the actions that would happen in the game was the student Liana, as she gave the food that her colleague Gustavo should put in the pot and later deliver to colleagues Mario and

Rodrigo who were on the other side being the customers. The group spent a considerable period performing this game (Field diary).

During the observations I observed the constant occurrence of role-playing games. In these games, the child relives situations experienced by playing, presenting them according to his understanding, playing roles, giving a symbolic meaning to the objects. Children at this age are not concerned with the rules of the game, creating "particular rules according to their interests" (Horn et all., 2014, p. 131).

The act of free play is a way for children to choose what and where they will play, thus exercising their autonomy fully (Truccolo and Rosa, 2024).

For Vygotsky (2007), first, the child plays alone, manipulating objects, and then he tends to look for partners to play with, thus exercising his power of choice.

05/12/2023: Rodrigo, 3 years old and Vitor, also 3 years old, went to the shelf and each took a bus. Liana, 3 years old and Gustavo, 2 years old followed their classmates and did the same. The children started playing with the buses, created two traffic lanes, one bus went on one road and the other came back on the other track. Rodrigo and Vitor expressed themselves more during the period, and the others followed.

When the children were carefully observed in their way of expressing themselves during spontaneous play, the dramatic expression was identified when the children assumed the role of driver. By entering the symbolic world, the child understands the role of the driver in society, that he drives cars. This presence of the symbolic, of make-believe was found in practically all the games.

Vygotsky (1979, p.138) states that, "in development, imitation and teaching play a role of first importance.... The child will do tomorrow alone what he is capable of doing today in cooperation". It is important to mention the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia, created by pedagogue Loris Malaguzzi. Malaguzzi emphasized the importance of the teacher establishing a relationship of trust with the child, thus allowing him to feel safe and confident to enter the world and develop skills. Malaguzzi said that children are not equal beings and that they express themselves in many ways, needing to be given the opportunity to make choices and discoveries, and that it is through experiences that they become autonomous (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2016).

Mario, 2 years old, decided not to join the group and approached him to tell him that the baby (a doll) was cold, because he wore short clothes, and the day was cold. It was then that he began to look around looking for something that I understood to be a blanket, to cover the doll, until he went to the place where his washcloths were, took his towel, and covered the doll on the table, saying that the cold had passed.

According to Piaget (1969, p. 29) "the child who plays with dolls remakes his own life, correcting it in his own way, and relives all pleasures or conflicts, resolving them, compensating for them, that is, completing reality through fiction".

Still, according to Piaget (1978) apud Assis (1994), the symbolic game plays a fundamental role in the child's life and represents the purest form of egocentric thinking, where the child transforms the world into what he wants this world to be; characteristic of the two-year-old child's representative or preoperative intelligence. Piaget (1978) apud Santos (2023) also evokes affectivity, mentioning that in this phase both thought and affectivity are "supported by symbolic and representative apparatuses".

Another moment on this day of observation of Mario 2 years old, was where he was playing with two cars and one facing down with the wheels up, he claimed to his classmates who were watching his game that there had been a crash between the cars. (Field diary)

Santos (2002, p. 9) says that "Symbolic games, also called symbolic play or make-believe, are games through which the child expresses the ability to act dramatically."

According to Nascimento (2022), children play with objects in different ways, discovering new possibilities for the materials they handle. It is important to mention that the process of developing autonomy requires social interaction, as it is extremely important for the child to be able to build his own independence through contact with various experiences. In agreement with Reichert and Wagner (2007) "The achievement of autonomy is a gradual and daily process, which begins from the beginning of our existence and, despite being a particular process, needs to favor the social context" (p. 54).

Florentino and Pescador (2022) highlight that free play has the power to promote the development of children's autonomy, when they play in a joyful, spontaneous way without adult intervention, allowing them to develop skills both collectively and individually.

For Vygotsky (1998, p. 137) "the essence of the toy is the creation of a new relationship between the field of meaning and the field of visual perception, that is, between situations in thought and real situations".

Day 13/06/2023: On this day Mario and Gustavo 2 years old, Rodrigo, Liana and Vitor 3 years old, chose the fitting games. Usually, when one chooses, the other classmates go and ask for the same toy to play with. They spent practically all the time destined to play free on this day, playing a game that is like a ball slide, where you put the ball in the clown's mouth and the ball goes down until it stops in the clown's shoe. At first there was some confusion among the classmates who were involved in this game, because they all wanted to go at the same time, so the head teacher made an intervention and explained to them that for a better moment and use of the toy they would have to go one at a time, waiting for

the classmate to finish handling the toy. After this speech by the teacher, they organized themselves and carried out the game without further interventions (Field diary).

Salgado, Dorneles and Brutti (2020) reflected on the role of the teacher during free play, the authors say that it is important for teachers to be prepared to carry out an approach when necessary, and to conduct the pertinent situations that arise during free play.

06/22/2023: The class that was being observed received a donation of children's books, and the teachers left it on the carpet, so that when they arrived they could see the news. Vitor, 3 years old, was the first to arrive, going to look closely and get some books to handle, and the others Liana, 3 years old, Gustavo, 2 years old and Rodrigo, 3 years old, after entering the room, were already approaching where their classmate and the books were. After a while, 3-year-old Vitor saw a book that had a story about firefighters and took a large truck that he had in the room similar to a firefighter's and began to act out in his own way what he was seeing in the images of the book. Then colleagues Gustavo, 2 years old and Rodrigo, 3 years old joined their colleague Vitor, I realized that this boy has an influence on the other classmates, because whenever he picks up a toy or even asks his classmates to take the toys he asks for, he is answered. I perceive Vitor as a leader of several games.

After the moment of ecstasy of the class for the new books that had arrived in the room, each one took the toys of their choice and continued to play. On this day they had greater attraction for the animal toys available in the room. Mario 2 years old, Gustavo 2 years old, Liana 3 years old and Rodrigo 3 years old picked up sheep, horses and ponies and went to play. The children organized themselves with little dialogue, and at a certain point each one took a pony and made the "pocotó" sound on the table, doing it several times. (Field diary)

Vygotsky (1998, p. 127) states that "in toys, however, objects lose their determining force. The child sees an object, but acts differently in relation to what he sees." It is for this reason that, when playing, children are able to distinguish thought, that is, the meaning of a word from objects, and action stems from ideas, not from objects themselves.

One of the responsibilities of teachers working in early childhood education is to ensure that students have opportunities to live situations, through free play, that help in the development of awareness about who they are and about the other subjects around them (Lopes, 2018).

The way the teacher plays her role will influence the child's behavior, as the child has not yet fully developed his autonomy, often imitating the teacher when interacting with other children.

It was noticed that the teacher planned the children's daily routine in order to promote independence and meaningful learning. In this way, the teacher contributed to the general development of the children, since she provided them with emotional stability and responsibility.

Zanluchi (2005) states that when children play freely, they themselves create situations that are preparing them for the social situations of life outside the school that they will seek to experience.

Soares (2017), in the light of the Pikler approach, states that playing as the child's main activity is essentially linked to their integral development, which encompasses emotional, motor, cognitive and social development. As a result, it is up to the teacher to provide the child with quality play, through which the little subjects are allowed to act on their own initiative with freedom of movement, with the possibility of exploring their movement with trial and error, building meanings and maturing in direct contact with the experience of spaces, it also says about providing the child with a quality development sensitive to their feelings and needs.

Bossonaro and Bruder (2018), on the quality of play in the light of Pikler, point out that the guarantee of a favorable environment for the child's autonomous activity is directly linked to the possibilities of action that the environment offers. From this premise, in agreement with the authors, we can highlight that it is not simply making available various objects that will incite the child's autonomous activity, but all actions that imply the promotion of the child's autonomous activity, of an inviting scenario where the child feels safe and welcomed to explore.

Piaget (1975) apud Silva *et all.* (2024) tells us that play should be seen beyond fun or play, and that it is through them that "children develop the notion of autonomy and reciprocity, order and rhythm". In this way, "play favors physical, cognitive, affective, social and moral development" (undated).

Children in early childhood education should not be seen as the same or similar subjects, each one has their own desires and ways of expressing themselves and consequently developing. Barbosa (2014) states that all the time that is invested for children to play freely should be respected, as it is a production that they will discover and build learning.

The importance of active listening to children was verified, stimulating dialogue and mutual respect so that they feel safe to develop, that is, giving voice to children, allowed us to verify that autonomy is built from the understanding that the child is competent to discover, experiment, test, try, rediscover, redo alone. To stimulate autonomy is to enable their free movement and respect their choices.

I evidenced that when playing spontaneously, children necessarily need to think, negotiate with their peers about the game to be played, discover new ways to play the same game, imagination, creativity is required and their individual repertoire grows. These factors are essential for the integral growth and development of the child's autonomy.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The guiding question of this research was: What is the contribution of free play to the construction of the child's autonomy? To answer the research question, the general objective was to investigate the contribution of spontaneous play to the construction of the child's autonomy. In order to achieve the general objective, the following specific objectives were outlined: to carefully observe how the child expresses himself through spontaneous play; to actively listen to the children, stimulating dialogue and mutual respect so that they feel safe and develop; organize the spaces in a playful way in order to stimulate situations in which the child can create, discover and exercise your creative side.

By carefully observing the child's way of expressing himself during spontaneous play, the use of dramatic expression and the importance of symbolic play were identified. This presence of the symbolic, of make-believe was found in practically all the games. The children also showed independence of movement, being able to use more structured toys such as motorcycles to practice physical activities and dice or *leggos* for manipulation activities. They enjoy being together and it even seems that they develop their own language where only they understand each other.

Actively listening to children, stimulating dialogue and mutual respect so that they feel safe and develop, that is, giving children a voice, allowed us to verify that the child's autonomy is built from the understanding that he is competent to discover, experiment, test, try, rediscover, redo on his own. To stimulate autonomy is to enable their free movement and respect their choices.

We understand that the arrangement of the materials, the way they are arranged in the room, interferes with the moment of free play. By having to request the material from the teacher, the child is deprived of recognizing himself as capable and independent to pick up the toy alone, delaying the development of autonomy. Thus, theorganization of spaces in a

playful way, stimulating situations in which the child can create, discover and exercise his creative side contributes positively to the development of his autonomy. In front of a large space, previously organized by the teacher, the children were able to make their choices and discover that they are capable of resignifying toys. Through constant dialogue and respect, the children were able to experience different activities, they were able to make different choices, while realizing that there are limits that they needed to respect, always under the watchful eye of the teacher.

The act of playing freely without adult intervention is the possibility that the child has to become confident, autonomous, attentive to his possibilities and limitations conferred by his young age. This whole process needs to be fostered, thought out, so that this little being develops integrally, with good self-esteem, with joy, autonomy, being able to exercise their favorite language, which is the language of playing.

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