

Periodization of children's psychological development, play and teacher training: possible dialogues

Periodização do desenvolvimento psicológico das crianças, o brincar e
a formação docente: possíveis diálogos

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to present studies on the regularities and non-regularities of the child's psychic development, in addition to the relation with playing as one of the activities that go through psychological development. To achieve this goal, we conducted a survey of researches, articles and books that address the periodization of ages proposed by Vigotski and collaborators in the Historical-Cultural Theory, especially Leontiev and Elkonin. We understand that children are educated and humanized through the appropriation of culture; therefore, playing is an appropriation and being in the world, it constitutes one of the activities that enhance child development and, consequently, it must be taken as one of the main axes for the constitution of relationships, reflections and social practice with target audience. In general terms, we can say that issues related to playing mobilize us to rethink teacher training, since teachers need to consider playing and the periodization of children's psychological development in the organization of pedagogical work, with the aim

RESUMO

O presente artigo tem como objetivo apresentar estudos sobre as regularidades e não regularidades do desenvolvimento psíquico da criança, além da relação com o brincar como uma das atividades que atravessam o desenvolvimento psicológico. Para alcançar tal objetivo, realizamos um levantamento de estudos, artigos e livros que abordam a questão da periodização das idades proposta por Vigotski e colaboradores da Teoria Histórico-cultural, sobretudo Leontiev e Elkonin. A criança se educa e se humaniza por meio da apropriação da cultura, assim o brincar é um apropriar-se e estar no mundo. O brincar se constitui como uma das atividades potencializadoras do desenvolvimento infantil e, como tal, deve ser tomado como um dos principais eixos à constituição de relações, reflexões e prática social junto às crianças. Em linhas gerais, podemos afirmar que, pensar as questões relacionadas ao brincar nos mobilizam a repensar a formação docente, pois argumentamos que as professoras devem considerar o brincar e a periodização do desenvolvimento psicológico das crianças na organização do trabalho pedagógico,

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of overcoming visions and simplistic attitudes. It is expected that initial and continuing teacher training will provide theoretical, didactic and methodological subsidies for education professionals to understand the importance of adults in presenting the world to the child and in the organization and planning of situations that enable to understand it and experience it in different ways and possibilities.

Keywords: Child Development. Periodization. Playing. Historical-Cultural Theory.

com o escopo de superar visões e atitudes simplistas. Espera-se que a formação docente, inicial e continuada, ofereça subsídios teóricos, didáticos e metodológicos para possibilitar, às profissionais da educação, compreender a importância do adulto na apresentação do mundo à criança e na organização e no planejamento de situações que as propiciem compreendê-lo e experienciá-lo em diversas formas e possibilidades.

Palavras-chave: Desenvolvimento infantil. Periodização. Brincar. Teoria Histórico-Cultural.

1 Introduction

“But I must warn you. Sometimes you start playing with your thoughts, and then unexpectedly, the toy starts playing with you. That's not good. It's only fruitful.”
Clarice Lispector

We can discuss Lispector's (1999) idea of “playing at thinking” as something that transforms us, bears fruit, and expands us, because, extraordinarily, play (“thinking”) humanizes us, encourages us to live life, and allows us to question the evidence of everyday life. At the same time, the term “play” invites us to reflect on meanings derived from different theoretical perspectives and fields of knowledge, since, according to Huizinga (1980), it concerns an element of culture that constitutes us as humans and is present in all forms of social organization – from the most ancient to the most advanced (high-tech) – and permeates all human existence, from infancy to old age. In modern society, it is associated with childhood and, therefore, is presented as something minor, worthless, natural, and spontaneous in children.

This representation of play, present in the social imagination, is also found in educational establishments, according to data collected in our research activities carried out in continuing education meetings in schools and study groups (RESENDE; 2015; 2018; DOMINGOS; SILVA, 2017). We

commonly observe, in various early childhood education institutions in the Triângulo Mineiro region, that play assumes a false protagonism in the discourses of teachers³, for whom play is one of the guiding principles of the pedagogical proposal. However, there is no intentional planning that promotes play as a constitutive element of childhood, nor is there any theoretical consistency in the discourse on play, which is seen as natural and spontaneous for children; therefore, it is only necessary to provide opportunities for free play in early childhood education.

For example, in activities with first-grade elementary school classes, we recorded some dialogues between teachers and children ranging from “here, in this new school, it’s not time to play anymore, it’s time to learn and pay attention to the teacher” to expressions such as “it’s time for serious things, and playing was at the other school.” This denotes a limiting view of play that is diametrically opposed to our understanding that it is an element of culture and constitutes the human being.

Fortuna's (2018) notes corroborate our observations, stating that:

Many educators seek the specificity of their professional practice precisely in the opposition between playing and studying: educators of young children, refusing to admit their pedagogical responsibility, promote playing; educators in elementary, secondary, and higher education, on the other hand, promote studying. Some teachers, trying to overcome this dichotomy, end up reinforcing it, since the play-learning relationship often invoked privileges the influence of directed teaching over play, decharacterizing it by suffocating it (FORTUNA, 2018, p. 47).

In the wake of the (mis)understanding of play, we experienced an emblematic situation. In this case, we were participating in a continuing education activity at a municipal early childhood education school in the city of Uberlândia,

³ Considering that the majority of education professionals are women, we have decided to adopt the feminine gender for the noun “teacher.”

Minas Gerais, where one of the teachers asked to speak about the lack of appreciation for play by families:

Teacher: You know, teacher⁴, this week, I don't remember exactly which day, during playtime at the park, Matheus⁵ said that his father had commented to his mother that the teachers at school don't work, they just let the children play, and that every time he comes here to pick him up, we are just playing and he is watching and talking to Ziza.

After numerous comments from colleagues, we asked teacher Margareth:

Researcher: And you, what do you think of this father's assessment of play? Why do children play? What is the role of play in children's lives and in early childhood education? What did you say to Matheus about play?

Gradually, the heated comments ceased and the teachers waited for Margareth's response. She said that she did not say anything to the child, but was very indignant [...] (FIELD NOTE No. 18, 2017).

This record may give rise to multiple interpretations, depending on the theoretical and methodological contributions of those involved and the purpose of analyzing the episode. For this essay, we intend to discuss some elements that may underlie Margareth's silence when asked about the reasons why children play and the role of play in children's lives and early childhood education.

Research and training sessions with early childhood education teachers have shown that, beyond the consensus on the importance of play for children, there is no coherent and comprehensive understanding of the psychological development of this target audience and its relationship with play.

Vygotsky⁶ (2008), when discussing play, draws attention to the lack of knowledge about play and its role in children's psychological development:

⁴ Tratamento dirigido a uma das autoras do texto pelo grupo de professoras em formação.

⁵ The names of the child and the teacher are fictitious.

⁶ The different spellings of the name of Russian psychologist Lev Semenovitch Vygotsky are due to different records in the works consulted.

I am inclined to attribute a more general meaning to this question, and I think that the mistake made by a number of theories is their ignorance of children's needs; theories that understand these needs in a broad sense, starting with impulses and ending with interest as an intellectual need. In short, there is a lack of knowledge about everything that can be grouped under the name of impulse and motives related to activity. We often explain child development through the prism of their intellectual functions, that is, before us, any child presents themselves as a theoretical being who, depending on their greater or lesser level of intellectual development, moves from one age stage to another (VIGOTSKI, 2008, p. 24).

Within the scope of this article, we aim to discuss the regularities and irregularities of children's psychological development, as well as the relationship with play as one of the activities that permeates psychological development. To achieve this goal, we conducted a survey of studies, articles, and books that address the issue of age periodization proposed by Vigotski and collaborators of the Historical-Cultural Theory, especially Leontiev and Elkonin.

According to this approach, human beings, from birth, appropriate the knowledge accumulated historically through relationships/interactions with the environment and others; thus, “the role of others is fundamental in the constitution of the self and in the development and learning that takes place throughout life” (KRAMER; NUNES; CORSINO, 2011). In this sense, children are active throughout the process, and play is considered an activity that can drive the construction of knowledge about the world in which they live.

Elkonin (1987) presents four arguments for the importance of studies on the periodization of ages: the first makes it possible to overcome the separation, existing in adaptive approaches to child psychology, between the development of motivational spheres and needs and intellectual-cognitive aspects, and to lay the foundations for the unity of these aspects in personality development. The second argument allows us to understand that the process of psychic development occurs in an upward spiral and not in a linear fashion.

The third argument about the importance of studies on age periodization focuses on the possibility of understanding the connections between isolated periods to establish the functional value of the entire preceding period for the beginning of the next. The last argument points to the idea of dividing psychological development into periods and stages in such a way that this division corresponds to internal laws of development and not just external factors. For better organization, we have subdivided the text into three sections: a brief note on the periodization of children's psychological development, in line with Historical-Cultural Theory; play and human development; and considerations about the importance of knowledge in this area for teacher training and its interfaces for the promotion of educational situations focused on play because, with “[...] a clear conception of human development, we can understand the meaning of the education process in the humanization process” (MELLO, 2000, p. 101) and, in some way, reframe our practices in educational institutions.

2 Periodization of ages in child development

We focus on some notes from studies on the periodization of ages in child development undertaken by Vygotsky (1996) – according to the historical-dialectical materialist framework – and left unfinished due to his premature death, as well as the contributions of Leontiev and the detailed formulation of the periodization of human development proposed by Elkonin. With this, we establish the foundations for the periodization of childhood⁷ and adolescence from the perspective of Historical-Cultural Theory.

For the purposes of this study, we seek to highlight some of the fundamentals of specific periods of child development in this theoretical approach. Vygotsky (1996) considers the main problem of ages in human development for

⁷ We will use Vygotsky's terminology to refer to children in early childhood education: First Year covers babies up to one year old; Early Childhood involves children from one to three years old; and Preschool Age refers to children from three to seven years old.

psychology to be a key element for all practical issues; therefore, the fundamentals for structuring “true periodization” must be sought in the internal changes of development itself: “only the twists and turns of its course can provide us with a solid basis for determining the main periods of formation of the child’s personality that we call ages⁸” (VYGOTSKY, 1996, p. 254).

According to Vygotsky (1991), child development is:

[...] a complex dialectical process characterized by periodicity, inequality in the development of different functions, metamorphosis or qualitative transformation from one form to another, intertwining of internal and external factors, and adaptive processes that overcome the obstacles encountered by the child. [...] evolution and revolution as two mutually related forms of development, one presupposing the other, and vice versa (VYGOTSKY, 1991, pp. 83-84).

According to the Russian psychologist, one of the criteria for characterizing specific periods of child development includes new formations, which, in turn, determine what is essential at each age:

We understand new formations to be the new type of personality structure and activity, the psychological and social changes that occur for the first time at each age and determine, in the most important and fundamental aspect, the child's consciousness, their relationship with their environment, their internal and external life, and the entire course of their development in the given period (VYGOSTKI, 1996, p. 255).

⁸ We chose to record the quotations in Spanish as they appear in the work consulted, out of respect for the author's thinking, which has often been misrepresented by inconsistent translations.

Table 1. Periods of child development

Critical ages	Crisis (new formations)	Phases of the crisis with a triadic structure (three interconnected phases): pre-critical, critical, and post-critical
Stable ages	Period/age	States of the period with binary structure (first and second states)
0 to 2 months	Birth crisis	a) pre-critical b) critical c) post-critical
2 months to 1 year	First year	1) early 2) late
1 year	First-year crisis	a) pre-critical b) critical c) post-critical
1 to 3 years	Early childhood	1) early 2) late
3 years	Three-year crisis	a) pre-critical b) critical c) post-critical
3 to 7 years	Preschool period/age	1) early 2) late

Source: Vigotski⁹ (1972, *apud* TOLSTIJ, 1989, p. 37).

This table shows the configuration of the development process for each period of childhood, with alternating stable periods (binary structure) and critical periods (triad structure). According to Vigotski (1996), during stable periods, changes in the child's personality occur slowly and internally, almost

⁹ It is worth noting Vigotski's (1996) presentation regarding the structure of age periodization: postnatal crises – first year (two months to one year); one-year crisis – early childhood (one to three years); three-year crisis – preschool age (three to seven years); seven-year crisis – school age (eight to 12 years); 13-year crisis – puberty (14 to 18 years); and 17-year crisis. However, subjects over six/seven years of age are not the focus of this study.

imperceptibly. They are more or less long—usually several years—in which there are no sudden changes or significant deviations, but rather microscopic transformations in the child's personality that accumulate until they reach a certain limit and then manifest themselves as a sudden, qualitatively new formation of age. “If we compare the child at the beginning and at the end of a stable age, we will clearly see what enormous changes have taken place in his personality, changes that are sometimes not visible, since development takes place internally, one might say underground” (VIGOTSKI, 1996, p. 255).

In critical periods, however, changes in personality occur rapidly and sometimes impetuously, with sudden transformations. These constitute real crises, which, in a short space of time, completely change the child's personality. For Vygotsky (1996), crises are different and should be integrated into the periodization of the study of child development.

Vygotsky (1996) presents three peculiarities of crisis periods that distinguish them from stable ages/periods. The first focuses on the indeterminacy/indefiniteness of the beginning and end of the crisis in relation to nearby ages, as it arises imperceptibly, although there is a culminating point at all critical ages, which significantly differentiates them from stable periods; the second refers to the difficulties adults have in dealing with children in periods of crisis, in which many children may come into conflict with those around them and suffer internal conflicts – however, it should be noted that critical periods are different for each individual; and the third peculiarity—perhaps the most important of the crisis periods—is the “negative nature of development,” with an evident process of extinction and regression, decomposition, and disintegration of what was formed in previous ages and characterized the child.

According to Vygotsky (1996), the negative side is as essential to the development of personality characteristics as the constructive process, that is, it never interrupts its creative power, and even in critical moments, constructive processes are produced: “the negative content of development in critical periods is only the inverse and veiled facet of the positive changes in personality that shape the main and basic meaning of every critical age” (VYGOTSKI, 1996, p. 259).

Consequently, the essence of critical periods is the emergence of new formations that participate in development in a latent state and, in stable periods, generate qualitatively new formations. According to Vygotsky (1996), there is a logical framework regulated by internal laws of development that cause the alternation of stable and crisis periods—this confirms that child development is a dialectical process in which the advance from one stage to another is not achieved through evolutionary logic, but rather through revolutionary means.

Vygotsky's studies (1996) may have been considered inconclusive due to the thinker's premature death, but they formed the basis for Leontiev's work, which broadened analytical perspectives on children's psychological development, with contributions regarding the activities of this audience, that is, "when studying the development of the child's psyche, we must therefore begin by analyzing the development of the child's activity, how it is constructed in the concrete conditions of life" (LEONTIEV, 1988a, p. 63). However, the activity may be the main one at a certain age and, in the subsequent one, less predominant, assuming a subsidiary role resulting from the child's relationship with reality.

According to Leontiev (1988b), the main activity has three attributes, namely:

- 1) It is the activity in which other types of activity arise and within which they are differentiated. [...].
- 2) The main activity is that in which particular psychic processes take shape or are reorganized. [...]. Certain psychic processes are not directly modeled and reorganized during the main activity itself, but in other forms of activity genetically linked to it. [...].
- 3) The main activity is the activity on which the main psychological changes in the child's personality, observed during a certain period of development, depend intimately. [...] (LEONTIEV, 1988b, p. 64-5).

Thus, the main activity governs the most significant transformations in the psychological processes and traits of the child's personality, in a given period of psychic development and according to concrete historical conditions. Thus, it is not the age of the child, "as such, that determines the content of the stage of development; on the contrary, the age limits of a stage depend on its content and

change *pari passu* with the change in historical and social conditions” (LEONTIEV, 1988b, p. 65-66, emphasis added).

Therefore, it is also important to understand the dynamics of each age, in terms of the relationship between the child's personality and their social environment, particularly the role of adults at each stage of development, so as not to make the mistake of considering the social environment as something external to the child, as an independent circumstance that, by the mere fact of its existence, influences the child. In fact, we must point out that the child's relationship with the social environment is dynamic and that social reality, the true source of development, is much more complex, as it is the culture historically produced by humanity.

It is therefore necessary to be careful when talking about the main activity, since children can develop from other dimensions. According to studies developed by Historical-Cultural Theory, “for each stage of human development, there is a type of activity that is dominant in that period, which does not exclude the occurrence of other activities in the same period” (SILVA, 2013, p. 55).

From this perspective, Elkonin (1987), based on Leontiev's studies, advances the research and presents a more detailed characterization of the periods of child development. He considers the understanding of the main activity as the fundamental axis of the evolutionary transformations of the psyche and the significant changes from one period to another.

According to the periodization scheme, there are three phases/eras—early childhood, childhood, and adolescence—and in each, there are two periods: human relations (child–adults) and objects (children–man-made items). The periods are distinct and, at the same time, intercomplementary, that is, there are those focused on people and others on the world of objects, but they alternate. However, there is “a relationship of mutual dependence, since the child’s relationship with objects is always mediated by people, just as the relationship between people is mediated by objects” (MARTINS; ARCE, 2007, p. 49), which constitutes a unique and dialectical process in the child’s psychological development.

Thus, early childhood consists of the period of direct emotional communication with adults, which covers the first months to one year of life. Then there is manipulative object activity, which spans from the first year to three years of age; the phase/period of childhood characterized by role-playing (preschool age – three to six years) and by study at school age – seven to ten years); adolescence (from 10 to 17 years old), consisting of the period of intimate personal communication; and professional and study activity (ELKONIN, 1987).

We can infer that:

Although the stages of development also unfold over time in a certain way, their age limits, however, depend on their content, which, in turn, is governed by the concrete historical conditions in which the child's development is taking place (LEONTIEV, 1988b, p. 65).

From birth, babies express themselves and interact in some way, with the aim of establishing communication with adults, whether through crying, whimpering, indicative gestures, physiological and emotional discomfort, or attempts to communicate. This search for interaction between the baby and the world, their surroundings, and culture characterizes their main activity: emotional communication.

This form of communication involves the presence of people around the baby who establish social relationships through “playing,” smiling, caressing, and talking, which provokes communication:

[...] from the look, the crying, the little cries that babies use to attract our attention. From the baby's point of view, the sensations they experience while we talk to them, our tone of voice, the way we look at them, how we touch them when changing, bathing, feeding, and sleeping lay the foundation for the emergence of more complex social feelings (MELLO; SINGULANI, 2014, p. 40).

According to Vigotski (2006, apud SILVA, 2013), the relationships that babies build from birth are proof that they are not asocial beings. Relationships with adults to satisfy biological needs are also socially mediated, that is, any

relationship between the child and the world goes through the adult and is realized with the help of another person.

In the dialectical and developmental process, children, from the age of one and a half, understand the world in their own way, observing, picking up, putting things in their mouths, and exploring objects in countless ways to learn about and give meaning to things. Touching and exploring different elements are the main activities for the psychological development of young children.

According to Mello and Singulani (2014):

An important element in understanding the importance of exploring objects for child development is realizing that when performing actions with objects, the little child goes from simple exploration to social use. At first, they pick up an object with both hands, then they will be able to hold an object in each hand; initially, they pick up the object in any position and later – under the influence of adults, that is, observing them to imitate their actions or under the guidance of an adult who teaches them how to use it – they will hold the object correctly. In this way, they learn the appropriate movements for objects, that is, they refine their motor skills and also develop the abilities and skills to use objects according to their social function (MELLO AND SINGULANI, 2014, p. 42).

In this light, young children appropriate objects from our culture through exploration, experimentation, imitation of others, and adult intervention. Adults who interact with babies on a daily basis should therefore act intentionally to promote the baby's development from birth to becoming a human being in the social world (ARCE, 2013b).

Through discovering and learning the social uses of objects, children advance in their psychological development as subjects of their own activity, capable and effective in their relationship with the world. In preschool age, children, in the transition from three to four years old, discover their personality and desires, are able to differentiate them in relation to other people, and perceive themselves as members of a society with the culture in which they are inserted. During this period, children gain autonomy, understand that they can be

independent like adults, and begin to form ideas about their own future tasks, such as the book they will read, the clothes they will wear, etc. The social situation of development achieved by children at each moment of their psychological development is specific and unrepeatable.

During transitions and learning, preschool children understand some of the rules imposed on them, namely:

Preschool children aged between 5 and 6 already understand the rules imposed by adults. Throughout early childhood, the meaning of words changes, and this is a sign of children's mental progress. This trajectory allows children to acquire new personality traits (PASQUALINI, 2006, p. 8).

The psychological development of children causes changes in their actions and functions, which in turn lead to qualitative leaps in higher mental functions such as perception, memory, language, thought, will, and ethical and moral values. Children aged five to six are able to give new meanings to everyday words, which broadens their understanding of the world and social relationships.

Thus, the child:

[...] modifies his psyche in a systemic whole, because at the same time that he undergoes transformations, he also transforms his cultural environment. The permanent movement of these modifications indicates the organization of his entire personality (SOUZA, 2007, p. 132).

According to Leontiev (1988b), for preschool children, play becomes the main activity and through this playful activity, games (subjective or plot-based games, games with rules, role-playing games, protagonist games, borderline games), qualitative changes occur in the child's psyche.

Children enter an illusory world when their desires are not fulfilled, as in social role-playing, where desires can be fulfilled at the desired moment. This leads them to new spaces of understanding that encourage them to continue, grow, and learn. In other words, in make-believe, they project themselves into the adult

world, rehearsing activities, behaviors, and habits for which they are not yet prepared. In this play, development processes can be created to internalize reality and promote psychological development.

In the meantime, preschool children begin to make various connections that enable the organization and development of higher psychological functions, which “pave the way for the child’s transition to a new and higher level of development” (LEONTIEV, 1988b, p. 122). Understanding the importance of key activities throughout the periods of psychological development of children up to six years of age should not be based on appearance or naturalistic description, since concrete historical conditions (human relationships and material and cultural heritage) shape development, whether in relation to apparent or internal activity, in the dynamics of long and dialectical psychic development.

Still in relation to the process of personality formation and higher psychic functions, typically human, Vigotski (2008) emphasizes that the environment should be understood not as an “environment” but as a source of development, in which activity and characteristics will be developed, because “Man is a social being and, outside of his relationship with society, he would never develop the qualities and characteristics that are the result of the methodical development of all humanity” (Vygotsky, 2008, p.90).

Within the limits of this essay, we will not delve further into the periods and characteristics of each main activity. Based on a few notes, we seek to address the proposition of periodization of child psychological development according to Historical-Cultural Theory in order to situate our defense of the relevance of constructs for understanding play, children, and the role of teachers.

3 Play and human development: some discussions

In light of the discussions presented on the periodization of child development, we address the possible relationships between play and its importance in the child's learning and development process. Our experiences in the field of teacher training lead us to believe that the concept of play, from the age

of four onwards, is a recurring theme and, perhaps, one on which there is greater consensus regarding the relevance of this activity for children.

In this sense, we will consider the first year of life, early childhood, and preschool age, in accordance with the fundamentals of play, toys, and games appropriate for babies and children up to three years of age in the institutional space of daycare centers. We will discuss this movement until the establishment of role-playing games, experienced with greater emphasis in the age group of four to six years old.

To guide this path, we refer to one of the most relevant works of the 1990s, written by Maria Malta Campos and Fúlvia Rosemberg, which questions the criteria for daycare services that respect the fundamental rights of children, especially the right to play, based on the guarantee of the following issues:

Toys are available to children at all times

- Toys are stored in places that are freely accessible to children
- Toys are stored carefully and in an organized manner
- Daycare routines are flexible and allow for long periods of free play for children
- Families receive guidance on the importance of play for child development
- We help children learn to put toys away in the appropriate places
- The rooms where children stay are arranged in a way that facilitates spontaneous and interactive play
- We help children learn how to use new toys
- Adults also suggest games to children
- Outdoor spaces allow children to play
- Older children can organize their own ball games, including soccer
- Girls also participate in games that develop large movements: running, playing, jumping
- We demonstrate the value we place on children's games by participating in them whenever children ask
- Adults also accept the games proposed by children. (CAMPOS, 2009, p. 14).

The possible answers to each of these questions depend on theoretical perspectives on child psychological development, which guide and will continue to guide our educational practices in relation to play and children.

In this article, as mentioned at the beginning of the text, we focus our attention on studies related to children's psychological development from the perspective of Historical-Cultural Theory (Vygotsky, Leontiev, and Elkonin),

as we understand that child development, with its internal laws, is a historical phenomenon not determined by natural and universal postulates, but rather by the relationship between external and internal factors, the objective and historical conditions of social reality, and the child's place in this context.

Adaptive processes can be properly understood as internal development always produced as a unity of material and psychological elements, social and personal, with internal changes and reversals caused by transformations in social activity that arise as the child develops. Consequently, it is not an innate (biological) adaptive process or one pre-established purely by symptoms, signs, and external indications valid for all children, that is, each child will develop according to their own uniqueness, following this movement of evolution, discontinuity, and revolutions that makes us human.

Vygotsky (1996), in a dialectical view, states that the changes produced in the course of development modify the social situation itself in a specific and unrepeatable relationship for each age. In this way, children transform, learn, and develop in social interactions, in which new knowledge motivates new mental operations and psychic capacities. According to Pasqualini (2016)

[...] we can thus understand that the source of human capacity development is the objectifications of culture and cultural practices historically produced by humans. The appropriation of culture is intertwined with the very process of humanization of individuals, which is carried out through educational processes (PASQUALINI, 2016, p.57).

If we understand that children are educated and humanized through the appropriation of culture, we can affirm that the way they play is a way of appropriating and being in the world. It constitutes one of the activities that enhance child development and, as such, should be taken as one of the main axes for the constitution of relationships, reflections, and social practice with children.

The care and affection that adults receive from babies give rise to the “embryonic form of the child’s social being.” Vygotsky (1996) states that:

[...] the child's relationship with the surrounding reality is social from the outset. From this point of view, we can define the baby as a highly social being. Every relationship the child has with the outside world, even the simplest, is refracted through their relationship with another person. The baby's life is organized in such a way that in all situations another person is present, either visibly or invisibly (VYGOTSKY, 1996, p. 285).

Still on the subject of relationships between babies and adults, Arce (2013b) draws on the studies of Zinchenko (2012) to explain the importance of words in a child's daily life, from the moment they arrive in the world to the formation of culture and the drive for child development. Adults, through words, gestures, and affection, play a fundamental role in child development by attributing meaning to the baby's life.

Through interactions with adults, the main activity of emotional communication begins. Initially, the baby participates in a rudimentary way, and as they observe the reactions of others (father, mother, guardian, or early childhood education professional), they feel stimulated to interact and seek expressions of joy and contact with others.

The baby, in turn, by becoming a partner and provoking communication and reaction from the other, encourages "play." At this stage of emotional communication, it is common to play hide-and-seek (the adult leaves the baby's field of vision and reappears saying, "Where are you? Found it!"), airplane (attracting the baby's attention to eat their food by playing that the food is an airplane and the baby's mouth is the airport), blowing on the child's belly and making sounds, etc.

Gradually, in their interaction with others, babies take on this playful game that crosses emotional communication and manifests itself to attract the adult's attention, establishing emotional exchanges through the body and gestures, as well as provoking play in adults. Thus, the games of movements of and with the body, undertaken by the baby throughout the first 18 months of life, expand their being and exploration of their surroundings, inaugurating the phase of sensory-motor actions of spatial exploration, touching, and manipulation of objects.

This activity of manipulating objects and “making a mess” is central to early childhood play, that is, exploring, manipulating, touching, grasping, breaking, and throwing objects on the floor are part of the playful process of children aged one to three years. In this case, they adopt extremely active behavior in their relationship with adults and the object world. Therefore, it is up to adults, in conjunction with children, to provide opportunities for exploration, “making a mess,” “destroying” objects, teaching the correct use and social function of each object, which, in the hands of very young children, represents a toy to be discovered and learned.

We can infer that babies and young children learn by playing in relationships and interactions between subjects and with objects of culture in their multiple artistic, technical, and instrumental manifestations. Therefore, babies and children up to three years of age should manipulate things, scatter things, “make a mess,” which promotes learning “and forms the basis for speech and verbal thinking—thinking with words that creates the basis for imagination, self-discipline, communication with others and with oneself” (MELLO; SINGULANI, 2014, p. 42).

In joint activities with adults, they assimilate actions performed with toys and then reproduce them “autonomously,” which characterizes playful activity, which is essential for children aged four to six, according to the assumptions of Historical-Cultural Theory. According to Mukhina (1996), children from the age of three progress in their pretend play in a progressive manner: first, they transpose the ways of acting of adults to objects, and then there is the playful transformation of objects, that is, they use one object to replace another. In early childhood, the constitution of social roles is still absent, that is, dramatic play itself does not occur.

Thus, we ask: according to child psychological development, what can we think about the current situation of Early Childhood Education and its relationship with play?

We believe that, based on this theoretical and scientific understanding of child psychological development, we can create human and material

conditions favorable to play. This means respecting childhood and the right to play, to be playful, to be a child as a historical and cultural subject. To compose a common thread about play, the target audience, and their psychological development, Leontiev (1988a, 1988b) describes, in his works, the psychological principles of play—it is worth emphasizing that the terms “play,” “games,” “toys,” “games with rules,” “role-playing games,” and “playful activity” were used in accordance with this author.

We often encounter professionals who emphasize the importance of “directed” play for teaching content such as “vowels,” “colors,” “numbers,” among others, in order to make play didactic; in this sense, care must be taken with the “didactization” of play in educational spaces. Initially, play is a secondary process for children, but over time it becomes a primary activity because it expands their perceptions of the world, which “includes not only the objects that constitute the child’s immediate environment, the objects with which they can operate, and in fact do operate, but also objects that are still beyond their physical capacity” (LEONTIEV, 1988a, p. 120).

In the meantime, Leontiev's (1988a) assumptions about play as the main activity developed by children stand out:

We use this expression to refer not only to the activity frequently found at a given level of a child's development. Toys, for example, do not occupy most of a child's time. Preschool children do not play more than three or four hours a day. Thus, the issue is not the amount of time the process occupies. We call the main activity the one in connection with which the most important changes in the child's mental development occur and within which mental processes develop that pave the way for the child's transition to a new and higher level of development (LEONTIEV, 1988a, p. 122).

More than teaching specific content such as “colors” or “letters,” pretend play is presented as a game related to human development. In this context, Leontiev (1988a) differentiates between animal play and children's play, since, according to him, children's play is precisely human and not instinctive, as it constitutes a basis

on which perceptions of the world are built. Thus, the content of play refers, above all, to the individual's experiences through social interactions; therefore, play presents itself as social and cultural learning.

Another misconception is that play in educational institutions must somehow “teach something,” suggesting that pretend play is simply a “reproduction” of aspects of children's daily lives. Such play is not only an opportunity to ‘reproduce’ experiences, but also to engage in activities that could not occur “in the adult world.” Thus, there is “an expansion of the number of human objects, whose mastery challenges the child as a problem, and of the world of which they become aware throughout their subsequent development” (LEONTIEV, 1988a, p. 120).

We cannot simply make-believe as an activity of imitation, as if children merely experienced situations and reproduced them mechanically. In view of this, Oliveira (1997) explains that:

For Vygotsky, imitation is not merely copying a model, but rather an individual reconstruction of what is observed in others. This reconstruction is guided by the psychological possibilities of the child who performs the imitation and constitutes, for them, the creation of something new based on what they observe in others. Vygotsky does not, therefore, view imitative activity as a mechanical process, but rather as an opportunity for the child to perform actions that are beyond their own capabilities, which would contribute to their development (OLIVEIRA, 1997, p. 63).

At the beginning of their development, children do not engage in abstract activity, but rather seek to understand the world through action. In this sense, “a child who masters the world around them is a child who strives to act in this world” (LEONTIEV, 1988a, p. 120).

Studies of Historical-Cultural Theory indicate that child development is a dialectical process that does not occur through simple evolution, but through revolutions; therefore, it is not understood that children develop spontaneously, but rather through humanization mediated by others. Thus, play is not considered

a spontaneous and instinctive activity of the child, but “ objective, as it is an activity in which the child appropriates the real world of human beings in the way that is possible for them at this stage of development” (ARCE, 2006, p.108). The author also points out that:

Fantasy and imagination, which are indispensable components of children's play, do not serve to create a world for children that is different from the adult world, but rather to enable children to appropriate the adult world despite the impossibility of performing the same tasks as adults (ARCE, 2006, p. 108).

It is important to emphasize that play not only reproduces the context and experiences of children, but also enables the creative process:

Play, in its most evolved stage, enables the development of imagination, which is so important to creative processes. However, for this to happen, its social roots must be firmly established, since it is from the world in which they live and their relationship with it that children draw the motives and content for their play (ARCE, 2013b, p. 24).

For these reasons, play is conceived in this theory as the main activity of preschool-aged children, as it creates a zone of proximal development for the child. Through play, children engage in actions beyond what they could achieve in their age group, which enables them to act in the world around them to try to understand it: “Through play, children reproduce a real situation in the world in which they live, extrapolating their real material conditions with the help of their imagination” (ARCE, 2006, p. 109).

According to Arce (2006), in the early stages of life, children focus on objects and the actions performed by adults in relation to these items. However, as children begin to advance in their pretend play, they begin to focus on the relationships established by people. Consequently, the relationships initially formed with objects give way to those that occur between human beings, which become the central focus of play.

By disregarding pretend play in the daily routine of early childhood education institutions, we certainly hinder children's development, as Arce (2006) explains:

Play is the result of our historical construction, as is the image of childhood that we have today, and ignoring this is like putting on thick veils and preventing us from seeing the essence of this activity for child development. Therefore, it is to propagate alienation, to separate us from knowing the real child and the impact that the world built by men has on their humanization process (ARCE, 2006, p. 114).

In fact, it is important to organize situations in which pretend play is considered a possibility for children's development; after all, “role-playing helps children to grasp the wealth of knowledge produced by humanity, generating revolutions in child development” (ARCE, 2006, p. 114).

It should be noted that play is also important for children aged six and above, even if it is not understood as a main activity, since it offers other possibilities for children's development. Perhaps these are the main misconceptions when we think about work in elementary school: children at this stage of education no longer have childhood; attention should be focused on teaching subjects such as mathematics, Portuguese, science, among others; and, if “there is time,” play can appear in the daily routine of institutions.

However, we must recognize:

[...] what is specific to childhood: its power of imagination, fantasy, creation, play understood as cultural experience. Children are citizens, people with rights, who produce culture and are produced by it. This way of seeing children helps us to understand them and also to see the world from their point of view. Childhood, more than a stage, is a human category because humans have childhood (KRAMER, 2006, p. 15).

According to this author, children are characterized by the act of playing; therefore, this activity needs to permeate Early Childhood Education and the early years of Elementary School, where it can span the entire existence of the individual, from early childhood to old age.

In general terms, understanding that we are social, historical, and cultural beings has enabled us to understand that play is part of the process of human constitution and, through it, child development is enhanced according to a dialectical process, in which the concrete conditions of the environment need to be considered when thinking about our educational action. It is essential to take a careful and sensitive look at the organization of educational practices, in which play is understood as a fundamental activity for children's psychological development by professionals and experienced in its fullness by all children.

With regard to teacher training and play, Andrade (2003) postulates that:

[...] often, in the initial phase of training, adults only allow themselves to play by pretending to be children, imitating behaviors that they disparage, mocking, ridiculing, and, obviously, making their views on play explicit. In these cases, infantilizing is synonymous with reducing, diminishing not only play, but also the child who plays. The concepts of child, play, and childhood do not appear in isolation. They are intertwined in discourse, made explicit in practice, and challenge us in terms of consistency. Consistency does not fall from the sky, but is sought and achieved (ANDRADE, 2003, p. 2).

Below, we set out some considerations developed in the text. In them, we reinforce the importance of paying close attention to teacher training and the possibilities of constructing and developing pedagogical proposals that consider the relationship presented between childhood periodization and the development of children, which is forged in play, games, and having fun.⁴ Some considerations

We assume that Historical-Cultural Theory provides a conceptual, critical, and coherent framework for analyzing the human psyche that is essential for studies on teacher training and the education of children up to six years of age, especially regarding the periodization of child development. The conceptual-propositional process of Vygotsky, Leontiev, and Elkonin regarding the concrete periods of this development calls on us to overcome the perception of the stages of a child's life as a product of chronological age or as adaptive mechanisms of behavior.

Through the studies listed, we note that children go through phases, from their insertion into the world and their first relationships with adults to immersion in language and the manipulation of objects. Then, through exchanges and stimuli, they develop forms of language, communication, and action in the world through imitation, until they develop role-playing games. In this phase, children seek to perform actions that they observe and experience in their relationships with their environment and, in addition to imitating actions, they construct ways of understanding and acting in the world.

Returning to the situation presented at the beginning of this article, in which the teacher was unable to explain the importance of play in children's lives and in early childhood education, we realize that she, as an education professional, has a fundamental role in organizing and promoting play, so that children can experience it to the fullest. From the nursery, through established relationships and shared experiences, we begin the process of mediating between children and the world. Without this intentional, planned action by the teacher, play could not exist, as it is not something natural, instinctive, or spontaneous, because “the relationships built through interaction, the presentation of a wealth of productions, and human social relationships constitute food for play” (ARCE, 2013b, p. 27). Therefore, the active role of the teacher is fundamental in this process, and the teacher cannot assume the role of a mere “observer” of play, but must develop thoughtful and intentional actions that promote play as an objective and precisely human activity (Leontiev, 1988b).

Meetings with family members are essential to explain the importance of Early Childhood Education and play in children's development and to achieve the objectives of this level of education—we must deconstruct ideas such as those of Matheus' family members, for whom play is a waste of time. When we develop planned proposals based on children's experiences in educational institutions, we must integrate families into the work, as this dispels “the idea of early childhood education schools as environments that replace the work done by nannies, environments solely for physical care” (ARCE, 2013b, p. 35).

From this perspective, thinking about issues related to play mobilizes us to rethink teacher training, as it is necessary for teachers to consider play and the periodization of children's psychological development in the organization of pedagogical work, with the aim of overcoming simplistic views and attitudes. Teacher training (initial and continuing) should offer theoretical, didactic, and methodological support to enable education professionals to understand the importance of adults in introducing children to the world, in organizing and planning situations that enable them to understand and experience it in various ways and possibilities.

Work from nursery school onwards must be planned, as interaction between adults and babies is fundamental to child development. We agree with Silva (2013) in highlighting that teachers have a primary role in organizing pedagogical work in early childhood education, insofar as it is necessary to break with the view also mentioned in the introduction to this text, in which play is understood as something “natural” and “worthless” for human development, as if our role were limited to providing biological care, such as feeding, sleeping, and contact with objects. It is essential to deconstruct the romantic conception of childhood, which “has denied thousands of children in our country the right to knowledge and integral development” (ARCE, 2013, p. 37).

In fact, we need to advocate for an education that allows teachers to think, experiment, discover, and learn about transformative experiences that bring play closer and closer to the daily life of educational institutions. Therefore, we advocate for a reinterpretation of pedagogical practices with children that consider play of *thinking* as the scope for teaching committed to the true human development of each child in the educational and social space.

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