The teacher's mediating role in toy library: reflections from the Historical-Cultural Theory[1]

O papel mediador do professor na brinquedoteca: reflexões a partir da Teoria Histórico-Cultural

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ABSTRACT

This bibliographic and documentary study aims to reflect on the teacher's mediating role in toy library based on Historical-Cultural Theory (HCT). HCT conceives play as the guiding activity of preschool development, through which children appropriate the cultural goods produced by humanity. Such appropriation takes place in the joint and intentional action between teacher and child. The history of the implementation of toy libraries in Brazil reveals the influence of Piaget's Genetic Epistemology. From this perspective, play is considered a natural activity for children, and the teacher is seen as a facilitator of this activity. Since HT emphasizes role of the teacher's mediation in the appropriation of cultural assets by children, it was necessary to reflect on their role in toy library. The results indicate that the teacher is not a mere facilitator of the child's exploration but a mediator in the organization, complexification, and expansion of the child's cultural repertoire, which becomes the central theme of role play.

Keywords: Toy Libraries. Historical-Cultural Theory. Mediation. Play.

RESUMO

Trata-se de um estudo bibliográfico e documental cujo objetivo é refletir sobre o papel mediador do professor na brinquedoteca à luz da Teoria Histórico-Cultural (THC). A THC concebe o brincar como a atividade guia do desenvolvimento na Idade Pré-Escolar, meio pelo qual a criança se apropria dos bens culturais produzidos pela humanidade. Essa apropriação ocorre na ação conjunta e intencional entre o professor e a criança. O histórico da implantação de brinquedotecas no Brasil revela a influência da Epistemologia Genética de Piaget. Nesta perspectiva, o brincar é considerado atividade natural da criança, e o professor deve ser o facilitador da sua atividade. Dado que a THC ressalta o papel da mediação do professor na apropriação dos bens culturais pela criança, fez-se necessário refletir sobre o seu papel na brinquedoteca. Os resultados indicam que o professor não é o facilitador da exploração da criança, mas o mediador na organização, complexificação e ampliação do repertório cultural da criança que se tornará tema do brincar de papéis sociais.

Palavras-chave: Brinquedoteca. Teoria Histórico Cultural. Mediação. Brincar.

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1 Introduction

The establishment of toy libraries in Brazil, beginning in 1980, encouraged further studies on the value of play, highlighting the importance of "[...] the inner life development and the sensitivity cultivation, without which there can be no real enjoyment of the beautiful aspects of life [...]" (CUNHA, 2011, p. 7). The author criticizes formal education for standardizing children's behavior according to society's expectations. Cunha (2007) argues that toy library should be a space where children can unleash their creative and inventive abilities, their affectivity, their capacity for fantasy, explore their limits, and get to know themselves. Given these objectives, toy library teacher is understood as a play partner who, shedding role of educator, is the producer of the show and not the process director, as the author asserts.

Toy library has been the subject of several studies since then. As Silva (2023) reveals, the articles publications, dissertations, and theses involving this theme increased in Brazil from 1991 onwards, reaching its peak between 2014 and 2018; however, such research has been declining every year since then. The author also points out that the field of education has the most publications on the subject. Silva's (2023) research offers an overview of scientific production on toy libraries and reveals that most research understands school toy libraries as a space that is widely naturalized due to their pedagogical importance.

The research is also rich in facts on the constitution of toy libraries in Brazil and the research carried out between 1991 and 2023. However, due to its descriptive nature, it does not go beyond the naturalistic conception of play as human adaptation to environment. This issue is revealed when the author states that toy library is an essential space for "[...] formation of healthy individuals adapted to context in which they live" (SILVA, 2023, p. 231) and that "[...] it presents itself as an adaptive and permeable space, which molds itself to diversity of the sociocultural fabric in which it is inserted" (SILVA, 2023, p. 232). The author's statements, which highlight the child's adaptation to the environment, reveal a biological conception of development. This concept,

based on individual's adaptation to the environment, restricts the possibilities of educational action through play, since it understands it as a natural activity for children and, moreover, considers that adult intervention can restrict the expression of children's creativity.

HCT, founded on historical-dialectical materialism, opposes currents that proclaim biological maturation as central to human process development. The premise that practical activity and language constitute the basis of the qualitative leap in human development, enabling the emergence of higher psychic functions, is a central tenet in the works of Vigotski (2021), Leontiev (2010), and other authors within HCT studies. Whereas animal development is defined by adaptive responses to the environment, human development is distinguished by the capacity to transform both nature and the social environment through labor activity.

Elkonin (2009; 1978), drawing on the works of Vigotski and Leontiev, challenges conception of play as a merely spontaneous and natural activity of children, instead presenting it as a leading activity in preschool development. According to the author, play is the means through which children's appropriate rules, social relationships, and the work activities of adults. He emphasizes that the enactment of social roles enables children to develop culturally mediated behavior, shaped by historically constructed tools and signs, insofar as it entails the reconstruction of adult activity.

The objective of this reflection is to understand the teacher's role in toy library based on the contributions of HCT. This theory provides support for the teacher's role in role-playing, aiming at learning that leads to development while preserving child's creative activity. To this end, we first seek to explain the history of the implementation of toy libraries in Brazil and the influence of Piaget's genetic epistemology, both in the organization of these spaces and in the training of toy librarians. Then, we present concept of playing in HCT as the guiding activity for development in preschool age. Finally, we highlight some guiding aspects for the teacher's action in toy library during role-playing, with a view to promoting the child's development.

2 Brief history of the implementation of toy libraries in Brazil and their relationship with Piaget's Genetic Epistemology

Toy libraries originated in 1934 in Los Angeles, when a shopkeeper created a toy lending system to solve the problem of frequent thefts from his store (NOFFS, 2002). Later, in 1963, two Swedish teachers created Lekotec with the aim of not only lending toys but also guiding families of children with special needs on how to stimulate development through play. In 1967, Toy Library was established in England, offering a similar toy lending service, which expanded to Italy, France, Switzerland, and Belgium under the name Ludoteca (NOFFS, 2002).

According to Cunha (1997) and Noffs (2002), toy libraries began to be established in Brazil in the 1980s. The expansion in the number of toy libraries led to the founding of Brazilian Toy Library Association (ABBri) in 1984 by teacher Nylse Helena da Silva Cunha. The goal of ABBri is to spread awareness about the importance of play and promote the creation of new toy libraries. Unlike Toy Library, which aimed to lend toys, Brazilian toy libraries were established as a space to serve children through different forms of play. Cunha (1997, p. 13) states that "[...] It is a space created with the aim of providing incentives so that children can play freely" and providing peace of mind for children to play without feeling that they are disturbing others or wasting time.

About the learning process, Cunha (2011) points out that, in toy library, the search for knowledge should be an adventure in spontaneous and enjoyable learning, that is, play is learning expression by doing and without fear of making mistakes. In agreement, Santos (1997, p. 14) states that

> The main educational implication of toy library is the appreciation of play, which results in respect for children's emotional activities. By promoting respect for children, it helps to reduce the oppression of rigid educational systems.

Santos (2000) and Cunha (2011) agree that toys are silent partners that stimulate discovery, self-expression, development of imagination, confidence, and self-esteem, and are also a means by which children reveal their inner

world. Noffs (2002) points out that, to achieve its goal, toy library must be welcoming and provide a sense of well-being, as well as being organized with a variety of toys and materials that encourage exploration, handling, and discovery, always in a safe environment.

> Toy library is a space where children, through play, construct their own learning, developing in a welcoming, natural environment that acts as a source of stimulation for development of their aesthetic and creative abilities, while also encouraging their curiosity (NOFFS, 2002, p. 160).

For Cunha (2011), toys are an invitation to action, like a ball that invites you to kick it and a teddy bear that invites you to hug it. Therefore, it is essential that toys are appropriate to the interests, needs, and abilities of each child, considering their stage of development. Although the author recognizes that age is not the only criterion for choosing toys, Cunha (2011) reinforces the universality of developmental stages based on Jean Piaget's studies of Genetic Epistemology.

Thus, she suggests that for sensorimotor periods (0 to 2 years), children should be offered rattles and colorful mobiles, toys with different textures, among others. As hand-eye coordination improves, building blocks, toy cars, and rag dolls, among others, can be added. For Concrete Operations Period (2 to 12 years), which involves three stages, she suggests: for Pre-Conceptual Period (2 to 4 years), offering cloth books, puppets, toys that represent real objects, and musical toys; for Intuitive Period (4 to 7 years old), building blocks, games with rules such as dominoes, circuit games, books, and painting and drawing kits; for Concrete Operations Period (7 to 12 years old), games with more complex rules (bowling, checkers, chess, among others), shuttlecocks, and mini-laboratories. For the last stage, Formal Operations Period (over 12 years old), social or adult games that contain a lot of information and fun are suggested.

Author's suggestions are based on Piaget's theory, according to which games are classified according to the type of assimilation they require, i.e., exercise games, symbolic games, and rule games, as explained by Macedo, Petty, and

Passos (1997). Exercise games refer to the process of functional or repetitive assimilation through which children up to one year of age form sensory-motor schemas and habits that will be necessary for future mental operations. Symbolic games are characterized by deforming assimilation of reality; it is the moment when child uses objects as if they were other things. For Piaget, as indicated by Macedo, Petty, and Passos (1997, p. 132), it is deforming assimilation because "the meanings she attributes to content of her actions when she plays are deformations—greater or lesser—of the corresponding meanings in social or physical life." Finally, rule-based games are characterized by the reciprocal assimilation of schemas, as they require the coordination of different points of view based on mental operations.

This classification of games has served as the basis for organizing toy libraries into different play areas. Cunha (2011) proposes that a toy library should include: a pretend play area with accessories, costumes, and toys representing professions, as well as a playhouse and a market; a reading area with a variety of books and a cozy space for storytelling; an invention area; spaces with construction toys; and an area for rules-based games, among others. The author also emphasizes the importance of a designated space for adults to wait while children play, since their presence in the playroom may limit children's freedom and hinder their creativity and expressiveness.

Given the many precautions taken to preserve children's free and spontaneous play, Cunha (2011) emphasizes that toy library professional – called a toy librarian – must be someone with sensitivity, enthusiasm, determination, and competence. They must have sensitivity to maintain respect for children and accept them in their differences; enthusiasm to maintain children's stimulation in play and the joy of the environment; determination and persistence in the face of everyday difficulties; and competence through study and deepening knowledge about child development.

For the author, the toy librarian's role is to provide care for children, foster their creativity, promote engagement in play, instruct them in the rules of games, encourage spontaneous expression, and prepare the environment—

always without interfering in the children's activities or decisions (Cunha, 2011). In summary, the toy librarian is responsible for facilitating children's actions, supporting the development of their potential and abilities, and contributing to their preparation for future life.

In this brief overview, it can be observed that the implementation of Brazilian toy libraries was based on an understanding of play, as explained by Piaget (1969, p.158),

> [...] preparatory exercise, useful for physical development (...). Just as animal games constitute the exercise of specific instincts, such as fighting or hunting, children who play also develop their perceptions, intelligence, tendency to experiment, social instincts, etc. [...]

Piaget reveals that human capacities are unique to human beings, but that they need to be exercised through play, just as animals exercise their instincts. In this process, it is essential to ensure free, spontaneous play, exploration, and freedom of expression for children.

In opposition to this conception of play, THC proposes overcoming the spontaneous concept of play by opting for an understanding of play as a guiding activity for child development in the preschool age period.

3 Development and psychological constitution of human beings in Historical-Cultural Theory (HCT).

According to Vigotski (*apud* DAVIDOV; SHUARE, 1987), overcoming development conceived merely as adaptation of the subject to the environment requires understanding that human psychic development is determined by appropriation of historically constructed cultural forms. In HCT, animal development refers to environment adaptation, with behavior governed by instincts and biological needs. Human development, however, goes beyond this condition, being characterized by transformation of nature through labor, while conscious behavior is guided by socially constructed needs (LURIA *apud* MARTINS, 2011).

Through work, according to Vigotski (*apud* TULESKI, 2008), humans created tools and signs[5], which resulted in development of higher psychic functions. These capacities have historically improved as signs produced in human activity have become more complex, revealing the importance of appropriating material and symbolic goods produced historically and socially for complete development of new generations (TULESKI, 2008). Aita and Tuleski (2017) emphasize that human consciousness is a system formed and transformed through appropriation of objective reality by the subject. Thus, cultural appropriation ensures, in ontogenesis, development of skills, abilities, and behaviors historically formed in humans, namely: humanization of everyone. It is important to note that appropriation is not a mechanical reproduction of reality, but a conscious process of attributing meaning based on individual experiences, needs, motives, or feelings (AITA; TULESKI, 2017).

When considering cultural development, Vigotski (2018) developed the General Law of Development, according to which all higher psychic functions arise, first, in the form of social relations, bonds, and communication through external signs—they are interpsychic—and, with the process of internalization, they acquire internal forms—intrapsychic. Based on Vigotski's studies, Leontiev (2004) emphasized that development is the result of child's social place in human relationships, concrete living conditions, and the content of the guiding activity, that is, the one that produces

> [...] important changes in the child's psychological development, within which psychological processes develop that pave the way for the child's transition to a new and higher level of development (LEONTIEV, 2010, p. 122).

Thus, for Leontiev (2021), it is not just any activity, but the essence of guiding activity is to mediate the subject's relations in real world. This mediation forms psychic reflection, that is, the subjective image of objective world. For the author, the guiding principle of guiding activity is a need that

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[5] These are psychic auxiliary instruments, such as iconic recording, counting systems, language, among others (AITA; TULESKI, 2017). Signs were created out of human need to transmit elaborate knowledge to others (LEONTIEV, 2010).

unfolds into motives and objectives; and the executing principle involves actions and operations necessary to achieve the objective. Therefore, guiding activity has a conscious motive-objective (affective-cognitive unity) that unfolds into different actions, with objectives.

Following the proposals of Vigotski and Leontiev, Elkonin (1987b) analyzed the main stages of psychic structuring by focusing on internal changes rather than solely on external behavior. He (Elkonin, 2009; 1987b) identified the guiding activity at each developmental stage, as well as the laws and driving forces that govern the transition from one period to another.

Early childhood (approximately up to three years of age) consists of two periods: the first year of life, whose guiding activity is direct emotional communication, responsible for the formation of guiding and sensory-motor manipulation actions; and early childhood, in which, through object-manipulative guiding activity, child assimilates procedures and actions with objects. At the end of Early Childhood, children generalize actions with objects and master their use, which leads to an interest in adult activities.

Childhood (from three to ten years) encompasses two periods: Preschool Age, characterized by role-playing as the guiding activity through which children learn about social relations, motives, and norms of adult life; and School Age, during which children acquire knowledge accumulated by humanity through the guiding activity of study.

Teenage years (from 10 to 17) encompass two periods: Early Adolescence, characterized by intimate personal communication as the guiding activity, which fosters the formation of close relationships among adolescents and the reproduction of adult relationships; and Adolescence, defined by professional activity and study, preparing individuals for the world of work and adult social relations.

Elkonin (1987a) explains that transitions between periods are determined not by chronological age, but by lack of correspondence between motives and objectives of activity and its technical and operational possibilities. Considering that this reflection refers to Preschool Age, and that at the end of each period

foundations of the next guiding activity emerge, we focus on the transition from Early Childhood to Preschool Age. According to Pasqualini (2009), in each period a new central formation arises, guiding structural changes in the child's consciousness, due to the interplay of multiple partial processes that act in concert and prepare for the subsequent period.

The guiding activity of Early Childhood (1-2 years), as highlighted by Elkonin (2009), Facci (2006), and Pasqualini (2009), is manipulative object activity, through which the appropriation of social procedures with objects occurs. First, children learn the general action scheme with the object and its social designation; later, operations are adjusted to its physical form and the conditions for performing action. During this period, according to Facci (2006), language acquisition plays a fundamental role in requalifying the child's psyche, as it serves as the primary means of communication with adults, who possess knowledge and understanding of the social use of objects. Facci (2006) and Pasqualini (2009) emphasize role of language in developing semantic perception, generalization of perception, differentiation of the "self," and formation of consciousness, which constitutes the new formation of this period. At the end of the period, Elkonin (1978, p. 512, our translation) explains that

> […] thanks to increased independence and verbal communication with adults, children begin to meet a wide circle of people outside their family. [...] In this new world that opens before them, their interest turns to people, their activities, their work, the objects they use, and their relationships with others.

Children's interest in adult activities reveals a contradiction: on the one hand, the need to learn about the adult world – its activities and social relations – and on the other, the impossibility of directly participating in them. To address this contradiction, role-playing arises as a means of reconstructing the adult world (Elkonin, 1978). The nature and development of play in ontogenesis derive from the conditions and social positions children occupy in concrete reality. Play functions as the guiding activity of preschool development, since it "[...] influences the most important aspects of the psychological development of

the child's personality as a whole, shaping the development of consciousness" (Elkonin, 1987a, p. 84, our translation).

Vigotski (2008) highlighted the importance of play in children's development, as the creation of imaginary situations frees them from situational constraints and allows action guided by "[...] internal tendencies and motives, rather than motives and impulses arising from things" (Vigotski, 2008, p. 29). In early childhood, the motivating force behind actions is tied to objects, and perception determines awareness of reality, defined by the affect/perception unit. This limitation is overcome through imaginary situations, which transfer meaning between objects and actions. Play thus becomes imagination in action, a new form of consciousness absent in early childhood (Vigotski, 2008).

That is why Vigotski (2008, p. 35) states that play creates the zone of imminent development, because "[...] in condensed form it contains within itself, as if by the magic of a magnifying glass, all the tendencies of development; it seems to try to leap above its usual behavior." In short, through play, children learn that adult activities, behaviors, and social relationships have rules that are not immediately apparent. This condition favors development of awareness of their actions and the social meanings of objects and behaviors.

Regarding the imaginary situation, Leontiev (2010) pointed out that play is an activity whose content is the adult's action that the child actively reconstructs and will later integrate into their consciousness. For this reason, children try to preserve as much as possible the adult's action, behavior, and relationships that they establish in the imaginary situation. However, it is important to clarify that in play, the conditions of action can be modified, although the content and sequence of action correspond to real situation. Thus, a piece of stick can be transformed into a vaccine, microphone, or paintbrush; however, the content and sequence of action must be maintained, especially for younger children.

Therefore, play is not pure fantasy, but is based on reality, and not everything can be everything, as the content of action must be preserved. In short, as Elkonin (2009) points out, children's actions in play are syntheses and

abbreviations of reality through playful actions. Elkonin (2009) considers role-playing to be a dynamic movement toward a more evolved form—the protagonized game, which is based on "[...] the relationships that people establish through their actions with objects [...]" (ELKONIN, 2009, p. 34).

This movement involves four levels of play development. At the first level, the central content is actions with objects directed at the playmate; roles are determined by the nature of action, and the child does not place themselves in typical relationships; actions are monotonous with repetitive operations without a logical sequence of these actions, which can be easily changed.

At the second level, the central content is still actions, but they correspond more closely to reality; children name roles and divide functions, but representation is limited to reproducing actions of role assumed; such actions are performed according to the reality observed by the child, and there is a quantitative increase in the variety of actions; children do not accept changes in the order of actions, but cannot explain the reason for their refusal.

The third level is marked by interpretation and execution of actions tied to the assumed role. Greater emphasis falls on relationships with other participants; roles are defined before play begins, and role guides the child's behavior. Theatrical speech directed at peers emerges, while changes in the logic of actions are rejected with the argument that "life is not like that."

And the fourth level is marked by actions that highlight social relationships with other roles in play; behavior is appropriate to role played and marked by theatrical speech directed at the other participant in play; actions develop in accordance with reality and the rules are well defined; violations of logic and rules are rejected by the rationality of the rules rather than by the reality represented.

Since it involves reconstructing the concrete nature of adult activities and relationships, Elkonin (2009) analyzes play from two perspectives: theme and content. Theme refers to dimensions of human activity—train stations, school, park, zoo, among others. Content, in turn, concerns the child's level of immersion in adult activity and social relationships. At the beginning of this

period, play focuses on reproducing the external aspect of adult action, its technical-operational dimension. As development advances, content shifts to the social and emotional relationships adults establish during their activities. For example, playing with a doll may reproduce the technical-operational aspect of action or, at a higher level, reconstruct the emotional bond between mother and baby during bath time.

This movement reveals that, in role-playing, children's awareness of reality is continuously transformed and expanded. However, this movement cannot be observed from the outside, as it involves a new system of relationships between the child and concrete reality. Elkonin (1987b) argues that the more synthetic an imaginary situation is, the deeper children's social relationships become.

Another aspect presented by Elkonin (1987b) is the fact that through play, children develop behavior mediated by tools and cultural signs, which promotes voluntary behavior and respect for rules. This development is fundamental for them to become aware of their actions and themselves, and to position themselves socially. Elkonin (1978) reveals that play enables the multilateral development of preschool children's abilities, namely: imagination; greater understanding of adult social activities and relationships; greater mastery of language; internal language; simple logical reasoning; voluntary memory; semantic perception; greater independence from adult assistance; mastery of behavior; collective activity; moral awareness; and cognitive interest in real phenomena, among others.

Assuming that higher mental functions are not biologically determined but are formed through the appropriation of cultural assets via educational processes, we understand that play, as a collective activity, enables each child to acquire the knowledge accumulated by humanity. In view of this, we will present some aspects that can guide the teacher's actions in the playroom, to overcome the notion that adult intervention in play can hinder children's creativity, spontaneity, and expression. On the contrary, we understand that teacher's mediating intervention is the basis for children to appropriate

cultural heritage and develop ways of thinking and behaving that lead them to school age and study activities, which are generated through play.

4 Role-playing in toy library: reflections on role of the teacher

The theoretical contribution of HCT, as explained by Davidov (apud LIBÂNEO; FREITAS, 2013), understands education and teaching as universal forms of human psychic development, based on cooperation between teachers and children with the aim of appropriating cultural riches. Thus, education needs to be intentionally organized to promote humanization, that is, the formation, in everyone, of culturally produced second nature, based on the selection of the knowledge and means necessary for this process (SAVIANI, 2008).

Enthusiasm, curiosity, and exploration are essential in play. However, without a teacher's intentionality in organizing knowledge and providing opportunities for its appropriation and the development of thinking, children remain at the level of mere appearances of phenomena captured by perception. We agree with Santos (1997) regarding educational nature of the playroom, but we disagree with the view that it is solely a space for valuing playfulness and respecting children's expressiveness, freedom, spontaneity, and creativity.

Since children are biologically deprived of the abilities that define them as human beings, the greatest demonstration of respect is to ensure their humanization, without depriving or restricting their access to cultural assets. To this end, it is necessary to promote activities that lead to development of more complex forms of thought and behavior. This perspective guides reflections on toy library as a place where the cultural wealth produced historically is present, and play is configured as the activity through which this cultural heritage is appropriated by preschool children.

Thus, it is necessary to consider, as Facci (2006) points out, that play is not an intuitive activity, since it involves the child's perception of their social environment. This environment is shaped by the forms of production of broader material life, as Duarte (2006) emphasizes; consequently, the teacher must guide

the child toward a deeper awareness of objective reality. According to the author, allowing spontaneity to direct play is risky, as it may lead to the reproduction of alienation embedded in social roles.

This concern raised by Duarte (2006) reinforces the discussion about teachers' roles in playrooms, aimed at overcoming biased behaviors that may be reproduced in play, such as the notion that only girls should play house. In this context, the teacher cannot act merely as facilitator or organizer of the space but must show how men and women engage in social activities—for instance, women working in various professions and men assuming responsibilities in household tasks. For this reason, we agree with Elkonin (1978, p. 513) that

> The transition from one level of play to another is facilitated by adult guidance, which, without altering the child's independent activity and creative character, helps children discover certain aspects of reality that will later be reflected in play: the specific features of adult activity, the social roles of individuals, the relationships between them, and the social dimensions of human activity.

The teacher is not only a play partner, but also someone who creates situations that lead to qualitative leaps in psychic functions (LAZARETTI; MELLO, 2018). Thus, teachers should not be held hostage to children's immediate desires, much less restrict their role to simply accompanying children's discoveries at play. On the contrary, Elkonin (1987b) states that teaching should encompass childhood in accordance with the laws of periodization and with a view to the multilateral and complete development of their abilities.

When applying this assumption in the playroom, organizing play involves mobilizing children to acquire new knowledge that enriches, expands, and diversifies content and themes of role-playing. When this occurs, it promotes renunciation of immediate desires and impulses, as well as coordination and subordination of behavior to play rules, leading to development of self-control and to more complex forms of abstraction and generalization detached from objective reality.

Elkonin (2009; 1987) highlights the teacher's role in expanding and detailing relevant aspects of reality, as well as in facilitating conversations and other

pedagogical activities. He also notes that the teacher is responsible for creating the conditions necessary for transitioning from one level of play to another by presenting human relationships established in various adult activities.

A situation that occurred in toy library Extension Project of the Pedagogy Course at the State University of Maringá – Cianorte Regional Campus (UEM-CRC) illustrates the importance of teachers having solid knowledge about child development and play, in addition to developing forms of intervention based on this knowledge: a 4-year-old girl in pre-school was playing in the kitchen sink, as if cutting something with a toy knife. Observing the scene, a student asked the girl what she was doing, and the child replied that she was making a carrot cake. The student promptly offered her a plastic carrot, but the girl refused it, saying it was "fake," and continued to cut her imaginary carrot.

This situation shows that, for the girl, preserving action in the imaginary scenario of cutting carrots for the cake was essential. The action could not be performed with a plastic carrot, only with an imaginary object. Using imagination to maintain action implies a separation between visual and semantic fields (Vigotski, 2008), reflecting development of abstraction and generalization skills to more complex levels that extend beyond the immediately perceptible field. The situation also indicates that the child was at the second level of play development, as her play focused on operational procedures rather than social relationships.

For the child to advance to the third level of play, imaginary situations must involve social relationships, for example, baking a cake to serve to visitors. In this case, the academic could have joined in the play, taking on role of a visitor who wanted to learn the cake recipe. This strategy would allow the academic to expand and encourage social relationships between roles in the imaginary situation. In addition, she could have included more knowledge, such as adding ingredients to the recipe, such as eggs, flour, and milk, to stimulate the child's imagination and explore mathematical, language, and conceptual notions.

The situation described above shows that the toy library, once seen merely as a space with various toys for free exploration, now emphasizes organized

activities that promote psychological development through appropriation of knowledge and cultural assets. Toys, as social objects representing historically constructed instruments, acquire meaning only within the activity that generates them—typically an imaginary scenario. Their use is not naturally known to the child, nor does it arise spontaneously; it depends on interaction with an adult who master's their use and guides the child.

At HCT, play is not an expression of the child's inner world or a distorted assimilation of real meaning, but rather an expression of the appropriation of the surrounding reality, which is why

> [...] if we want children to play pilots, soldiers, drivers, if we want them to take on one role or another, they must first generalize the corresponding social functions and rules of behavior (ELKONIN, 1987a, p. 92).

This statement by the author reveals another aspect of the teacher's role in the playroom, namely, highlighting the different social roles assumed by adults and the rules arising from these roles. However, as Leontiev (2010) explains, teachers must guide play in such a way as not to stifle it and, as Elkonin (1978) states, without altering independent activity and creativity. To this end, we consider that the principles listed by Pasqualini (2010, pp. 194-195) for teaching in early childhood education can be applied in the playroom, such as:

> • Create conditions for the gradual overcoming of the involuntary and spontaneous functioning of the child's psyche, promoting development of self-control of behavior (higher psychological functions).
> • Promote the complexification of the structure of the child's activity, promoting the overcoming of operational functioning determined by the present visual situation towards actions subordinated to specific purposes and articulated to the reason for the activity.
> • Create needs in the child that can become motives for their activity.
> • Promote development of empirical thinking and form the basis for development of theoretical thinking.

These principles guide the teacher's actions in toy library to promote development of children's maximum human capacities, which will not be achieved spontaneously. This does not mean offering the greatest diversity of toys but rather enabling a diversity of interactions with cultural assets created by humanity.

Based on HCT assumptions, educational work in the playroom is not limited to valuing play or respecting free expression, creativity, and spontaneous learning. Instead, it focuses on humanizing the child, considered the highest expression of respect. The teacher's role is no longer merely to facilitate the child's spontaneous actions but to oversee the educational process, organizing play and mediating knowledge and actions that require more complex levels of thought and behavior. According to Franco, Alves, and Mendonça (2019, n/p)

> It is important to emphasize that the link with real life brings with it the rationality that exists in the activities and objects that are intertwined with the child's empirical thinking. [...] The teacher's instruction should lead the child into the universe of rationality that is approaching, guiding their empirical thinking towards more rational and scientific ways of thinking.

This movement from empirical thinking to more complex forms of thinking, which will be developed in the School Age, does not occur naturally, and the playroom should be understood as a space for play that enables children to develop more complex forms of thinking through the elaboration of concepts. Considering that development of higher psychic functions first arises in the form of social relationships, bonding, and communication through external signs, it is role of the teacher in the playroom to enable such interactions mediated by signs in social role-playing.

It is also the teacher's responsibility in the playroom to expand children's knowledge of their surrounding environment, particularly regarding several forms of social relationships adults establish in different activities, and to incorporate into play the knowledge required for engaging in such activities. In this way, it becomes possible to create conditions for transitioning to school age and to the study activity that will guide the child's development.

5 Final Considerations

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the reflection on role of teachers in role-playing in toy libraries from the perspective of THC. This issue is justified by the fact that the implementation of toy libraries in Brazil was influenced by Piaget's Genetic Epistemology, which understands play as a natural activity that prepares children's abilities. From this perspective, the teacher is seen as a facilitator who organizes and provides the widest possible variety of toys for children to explore freely.

Based on HCT, the playroom is understood as a space for interrelationships mediated by cultural heritage that children need to appropriate, with play serving as a guiding activity rather than a skills exercise. Teacher participation in play is important—not as a companion, but as a holder of knowledge essential for the child's development. As Lazaretti and Mello (2018) emphasize, teacher involvement enriches the plot, expands and diversifies themes, and introduces relationships and knowledge not directly perceptible to the child.

At a time when there is a growing emphasis on the need for skills and competencies from early childhood education onwards, and when educational institutions are experiencing a decline in scientific knowledge, it is vital to restore role of knowledge in humanization process. It should be noted that play, as an exercise in skills and exploration, is focused on knowledge derived from sensory actions and operations; but as a guiding activity, it leads to development of the premises of theoretical thinking that will be developed in the later stages of development.

We agree that teachers should be able to play and not hesitate to engage in playful actions, such as imitating a horse or a frog. However, in the playroom, the teacher must enable children to play in ways that involve knowledge and concepts, allowing empirical thinking formation—characteristic of this period—to advance toward establishing the foundations of theoretical thinking. In this way, the teacher is not only a companion in play but also someone who guides the journey, and the playroom becomes a space for humanizing the child.

El papel mediador del docente en la ludoteca: reflexiones desde la Teoría Histórico-Cultural

RESUMEN

Se trata de un estudio bibliográfico y documental cuyo objetivo es reflexionar sobre el papel mediador del profesor en la ludoteca a la luz de la Teoría Histórico-Cultural (THC). La THC concibe el juego como la actividad guía del desarrollo en la Edad Preescolar, medio por el cual el niño se apropia de los bienes culturales producidos por la humanidad. Esta apropiación no ocurre de forma directa e inmediata, sino en la acción conjunta e intencional entre el profesor y el niño. La historia de la implantación de ludotecas en Brasil muestra la influencia de la Epistemología Genética de Piaget. En esta perspectiva, el juego es considerado una actividad natural del niño, y el profesor debe ser un facilitador de su actividad. Dado que la THC resalta el papel de la mediación del profesor en la apropiación de los bienes culturales y el conocimiento por parte del niño, es necesario reflexionar sobre su papel en la ludoteca. Los resultados indican que el profesor no es un facilitador de la exploración del niño, sino el mediador en la organización, complejización y ampliación del repertorio cultural del niño que se convertirá en el tema del juego de roles sociales.

Palabras clave: Ludoteca; Teoría Histórico Cultural; Mediación; Juego.

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