

## ARTICLE

# The play and social constitution of children in a context of early childhood education

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents a research about the play and social constitution of children in a context of early childhood education regarding family contexts. An approach to the games was established in order to unveil the intersubjective and societal relations, as well as the cultural repertoires appropriated by the children. Based on the theoretical constructs of childhood's social studies and on an ethnographic and participative perspective, the children were considered the main declarants. This research reaffirms the play as an activity of intercultural confrontation, in which children build complex stories, mix and combine diverse elements, which are derived from the relationships established at the family context and also at early childhood education, within the scope of local context and wider culture.

### KEYWORDS

play; social constitution; early childhood education.

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## ***A BRINCADEIRA E A CONSTITUIÇÃO SOCIAL DAS CRIANÇAS EM UM CONTEXTO DE EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL***

### **RESUMO**

Este artigo apresenta uma pesquisa sobre o brincar e a constituição social das crianças no campo de educação infantil, no que tange a contextos familiares. Procurou-se desvendar as relações intersubjetivas e societárias, bem como os repertórios culturais apropriados pelas crianças. O trabalho fundamentou-se nos construtos teóricos dos estudos sociais da infância, predominantemente na sociologia da infância, e sob uma perspectiva etnográfica e participativa as crianças foram consideradas as principais informantes. A pesquisa reafirma o brincar como uma atividade de confronto intercultural, em que as crianças constroem enredos complexos, misturam e combinam elementos diversos, provenientes das relações que estabelecem no contexto familiar e de educação infantil, no âmbito do contexto local e da cultura mais ampla.

### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

brincadeira; constituição social; educação infantil.

## ***EL JUGAR Y LA CONSTITUCIÓN SOCIAL DE LOS NIÑOS EN UN CONTEXTO DE EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL***

### **RESUMEN**

Este artículo presenta una investigación acerca del jugar y de la constitución social de los niños en un contexto de educación infantil, en relación con los contextos familiares. Se buscó desvendar a las relaciones intersubjetivas y sociales, así como los repertorios culturales apropiados por los niños. El trabajo se fundamentó en constructos teóricos de los estudios sociales de la infancia, y desde una perspectiva etnográfica y participativa, los niños fueron considerados los principales informantes. La investigación reafirma el juego como una actividad de confrontación intercultural, en la cual los niños construyen enredos complejos, mezclan y combinan elementos diversos, provenientes de las relaciones que se establecen en el contexto familiar y de educación infantil, en el ámbito del contexto local y de la cultura más amplia.

### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

juego; constitución social; educación infantil.

This article is the result of a study<sup>1</sup> that analyzed children's social constitution in spaces-times of play through approximation to their practices, cultural repertoires, and intersubjective and societal relations.

Reflections in recent decades about childhood as a social category and children as active members of society have been provoking renovations in the approaches of theoretical, epistemological and methodological plans in childhood studies. This movement confronts traditional education studies, whose focus had been restricted to pedagogical processes and methods and sought single and general orientations for children's education, which were conceived in an abstract and universal manner. For Pedagogy, contributions of childhood social studies have indicated the need to take educational action knowledge about children as a starting point to beyond that defined as a development standard. Investigating children's contours and constitution processes of childhood and of their education implies considering them as cultural agents and a qualified declarant, which leads to the need of observing how and about what they play; the interlinking that they establish between fantasy and reality; the expressions of their imagination; how they interpret daily life themes; and other aspects and dimensions (Rocha, 2011).

Hence, choosing the context of play to analyze children's social constitution is based on understanding that play, as Ferreira (2004a) proposed, is one of the means through which children do things and act in the world. They use play not only to prepare themselves for the world, but also as a communicative resource to participate in daily life, in social interaction, giving meaning to actions.

## (RE)ENCOUNTERING FORMS OF UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CONSTITUTION IN THE CONTEXT OF PLAY: RESEARCH PATHS

Listening to children's perspectives means to recognize and legitimate the importance of this social group's participation in a wide variety of social spaces and in researches. Therefore, we opted for a qualitative methodological orientation based on the lines of ethnography and participatory investigation that, as Christensen and James (2005) highlighted, expand the opportunities to construct a body of knowledge based on children's indications, allowing us to explore what they do in the context, instead of only saying what they are.

The group called GV/VI, with which we developed the study, was composed<sup>2</sup> of 17 children, which included one black boy, one brown boy, nine white girls and six white boys, aged four-and-a-half to six-and-a-half. These children and two profes-

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1 This article is based on the doctoral thesis: *O brincar e a constituição social das crianças e de suas infâncias em um contexto de educação infantil* [The play and children's social constitution and their childhoods in a context of early childhood education] (Rivero, 2015). It was conducted under the supervision of Eloísa Acires Candal Rocha. A preliminary and shortened version of this text was presented orally at the 38<sup>th</sup> National Meeting of Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Educação (ANPEd) held from October 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> of 2017, in São Luís do Maranhão (MA), Brazil.

2 Data declared by the families, obtained through consultation to registration forms.

sionals<sup>3</sup> met daily in a public institution of early childhood education located in a small village twenty kilometers from Florianópolis city center, Santa Catarina state capital. Bathed by a 700-kilometer long beach and with a population<sup>4</sup> of 4,925 people, of whom 271 were children, the location presented vestiges of the small fishing village<sup>5</sup> that it had been, with narrow streets, a number of houses built on a single plot of land based on kinship relations, residents who get around by foot and bicycle, among other aspects.

The institution,<sup>6</sup> in which group children attended from Monday to Friday, for about 5 hours each morning, is located around 600 meters from the beach, on the land of a residential neighborhood. There were a square, a few residences and a green area with no buildings around it, through which some families used to take and get their children from class. The traffic in the region was quite peaceful, even though most of the family members and professionals used cars as means of transportation.

During the first field contact, we presented some criteria<sup>7</sup> for performing the study, and the pedagogical staff and teachers in the group indicated the mixed group GV/VI as the most appropriate for conducting the work. Nevertheless, the encounter with the group children was a determining factor for defining the field, as revealed in the following excerpt from the Field Journal of September 12, 2011:

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3 Professionals responsible for the GV/VI were accompanying the group for the second consecutive year. The teacher had a master's degree in education and had been in the municipal school system for six years as a fulltime teacher. The classroom assistant had a technical course degree in teaching and had been a full employee of the municipal school system for ten years.

4 Census Data (IBGE, 2010).

5 The development of tourism and the district urbanization led to de-structuring of activities, such as "artisan fishing, agriculture, production of various artifacts, manioc flour and derivatives from sugarcane", which resulted in a growing change in its ecosystem. In addition, "The island residents were mostly expropriated from their plots of land quickly. Some of them were destined for real estate speculation over the long term, others were immediately subdivided and sold" (Cecca, 1997, p. 105).

6 Linked to the City School System, this institution attended a total of 225 children, aged 4 months to 5 years and 11 months, from 7 am to 1 pm, for the morning period, and from 1 pm to 7 pm for the afternoon period. The group of professionals was composed of 8 teachers, with graduate studies, and 12 classroom assistants with high school education and teacher training courses, although they were taking college courses. The staff was composed of 1 teaching assistant, 1 supervisor, 1 principal, 4 cafeteria employees, 5 general service assistants, besides 1 teacher and 2 cooks reassigned from other positions. The parents were 20 to 35 years old, and their school educational level ranged from elementary and high school (complete and incomplete). They worked in various fields, including as guards, cleaning women, fishermen, cooks, service assistants, carpenters and masons, full-time maids, washing clothes, among others (Projeto Político Pedagógico, 2013).

7 The following stood out among criteria that guided the fieldwork definition: the possibility of approximation to children in their family contexts; some independence by the group of children, in relation to the organization of spaces and times to play; the acceptance of children and teachers to the researcher's constant presence in various daily school life situations, as well as written registrations, photographs and video.

The teacher let me speak to the class and I began by stating my name. I told them that I had already taught for children, but now I was teaching for adults. I said that I was there to conduct a study about play, since I had played a lot when I was a child and when I became an adult, I forgot many things. “I would like to learn with you about the play”, I told them. The teacher explained that I would do a study like the one they did about dinosaurs. Then I asked the group if I could do the study with them. They immediately responded, in unison, yes. I added that I would only stay close to them and accompany them if they let me, that when they did not want me to be with them, they could say so. The teacher helped me by saying: “yes, they sometimes want to do things without anyone around”. After this, the teacher asked them to introduce themselves to me, and each one said their name, while I noticed them watching me with curiosity. (Field Journal, 09/12/11)

The teacher’s mediation in this first contact significantly contributed to the establishment of connections with situations and meanings related to the group. Hence, the conversations and interactions with the children on my first days in the field, which were marked by many doubts and insecurity on what to say and how to act, served to open a communication channel, but it was their invitations to participate in the play and in various other situations, during my stay at the institution, and the relations constructed with each child, that confirmed the acceptance of the researcher’s presence among them. Thus, the approximation to the children and their consent<sup>8</sup> involved a process, revealing that the “interpretation of children’s consent is complex and ambiguous, and its confirmation can only be clarified over time” (Ferreira, 2010, p. 162).

The aim of a study *with* children and not *about* them required constant epistemological surveillance and methodological creativity in relation to an adult-centric perspective, as well as permanent reflexivity about power relations, problems and difficulties regarding the investigative process. We were therefore challenged, in the words of Soares, Sarmiento and Tomás (2005, p. 55), to redefine the “identity as researchers, decentering ourselves from the traditional role of administrators of the entire process, to conceive a co-mangement of the investigative research work with children”.

To construct approximations and circulate through the children’s living contexts, including the institution, their homes and other possible contexts, a decision of residing in the community for approximately five months was taken. The move to that location enabled to arrive to the institution many times even before the group children, and to accompany them until the end of the morning, when their families arrived to pick them up. The daily presence proved to be important not only to become closer to the children, but also to the professionals and families. Therefore, I attended the institution four days a week, from 7h30 am to 12h30 pm for four months, to accompany the children as constantly as possible.

8 Consent from the children to the study performance is different from the legal formality, obtained from family members, with signature of a consent form.

The central focus of observations was on children's actions during the period they stood at the institution, and we used different instruments to register them: a Field Journal, a voice recorder, a photographic camera and a small hand video-recorder. Upon identifying a situation of play, the video-camera was usually positioned at a fixed point in the room, which freed the researcher to carefully observe that situation and take notes or even participate when invited by the children. At other times, we used the photographic camera in film mode to register situations that took place in locations of difficult access or even in spaces outside the institution. Considering the device was small, it was easier to use it to register the play in progress and achieve a recording with better sound quality. These methodological procedures, with their imagetic and polyphonic potential, created opportunities to explore new meanings on the children's actions.

In the first weeks, some of the children approached the researcher and asked to review the recordings of their games on video, which were shown to them. But they gradually stopped making these requests. In agreement with the teacher, we decided to show some of these videos to the entire group to provide the children access to what we were recording and hear what they had to say. At first, they were attentive, however, they soon showed a lack of interest in watching the recordings. It seems they were not interested in watching the games they had just played, when they could play others, instead of just watching them.

When filming, photographing and taking notes, an effort was made to avoid invading and interrupting the play. However, when we were asked to participate, we would usually accept the invitation, taking care to not accept roles that would require protagonist role in the plot, because this would prevent the researcher from paying attention to the children's speech, looks, gestures, agreements, conflicts and movements.

Considering family as one of the socially recognized instances in social constitution processes, the intention was to take the study beyond the walls of the early childhood education context towards family contexts. Most of the parents<sup>9</sup> of the group children worked<sup>10</sup> and, thus, share the task of caring for and educating the children with the institution of childhood education. Most of the children in the group, more precisely 15 of them, lived with their parents, and two lived only with the mother. In addition, 10 children were single child, four had two siblings, and the other three had one sibling.

The intent was to expand understanding about children's lives beyond the early childhood education institution and, above all, about their repertoires, spaces,

9 Regarding the family members' school educational level, most of them, 11 women and seven men, had a graduation degree from high school, and four men and five women were college undergraduates.

10 Among the families, 10 of them reported total household income — of both the mother and father or of those with only one working parent. Among them, two declared an income up to one thousand Brazilian reais, four others reported an income between one thousand and one thousand and five hundred Brazilian reais, and only one family had an income from one thousand and five hundred to two thousand Brazilian reais, and finally, three families had an income between two thousand and five hundred Brazilian reais and three thousand Brazilian reais.

times, materials and partners in play. Some family members understood and supported the reasons for requesting to go to their houses, but for others that request seemed strange, particularly because it came from someone they had known for only a brief time. The children, however, immediately accepted the idea, and some of them frequently asked when we would go to their houses. After some time, it was possible to become closer to the family members who were more present at the institution, and children had an essential role in this process, because, as some parents said to us, the children told them about the games in which the researcher participated, and also requested that she went to their houses. The insertion<sup>11</sup> became possible in the houses of six children, three girls and three boys, and one visit was made to each home.

It was the first time we established closer contact with parents, and it was clearly not easy for them to receive a person/researcher who they barely knew in their homes, who would be evaluating their practices with their children.

We would initially speak with the children together with their family members, and soon afterwards, we remained alone with the kids. During the conversations, at various times, the family members took the responsibility to respond, while the children accompanied the adults' discussion and frequently interrupted them to add something, to show a toy or to speak about their games.

Since the toys were in the children's rooms, we spoke and played with the children in such space, in nearly all of the visited contexts. In most situations, the children invited the researcher to go to their rooms and also to move through some spaces of the house, so that I did not only stay in the living room, where I was usually greeted. Most of the family members would leave at this time, allowing me to hear the children's answers to questions that had been previously answered by the adult, and also the various issues about which they wanted to speak. These conversations took place while they showed their toys, but as soon as they revealed a desire to begin to play, we would allow the play to begin. Another excerpt from the Field Journal reveals how this moment occurred during the visit<sup>12</sup> to one of the boys' house:

Carlos went to get toy cars to play and I chose one of them. After seeing the one I had chosen, Carlos told me to get a Hot Wheels toy car. I asked him why I needed to choose one of those cars and he showed me the part underneath the cars, saying that they had numbers. For this reason, he knew that they were better and faster than the others. When we played with the cars, on the small balcony on the second floor, Carlos told me that he ate strawberries from the "small backyard" and later showed me the bicycle that he rode in the house. Soon after, when we went back to his room, Carlos told me that he was a little cat, that had become a cheetah, and that I was a "cheetah", who had been born

11 In the next-to-last month of the fieldwork, we received the first invitation from one of the families and, during the final month, from another five, which made it unviable to propose new visits to their homes, as we intended to do at the beginning.

12 The visit to Carlos' house lasted approximately one hour, and part of it was audiorecorded for 19 minutes and 25 seconds.



from an egg. They thought she was a cat, but she was a cheetah. During the game, Carlos became a baby cheetah, which had also been born from an egg. On the days after the visit, we continued to share various situations at the institution and to play, usually accompanied by Natália, with whom Carlos usually roled-play of being animals that evolved from one species to another. (Field Journal, 11/29/11)

We understood that playing with children in their houses became possible due to the relations built with the researcher over the months. When participating in their play moments at the institution not only observing, but also playing with them, children gave indications that they considered the researcher someone to be “initiated in their games” and, therefore, an adult with whom it was possible to play.

Given the objective impossibility of visiting family contexts of all the children in the group, we sought to locate indications of play and social and cultural elements arising from multiple contexts in their social actions.

Thus, the approximation to the GV/VI children's living conditions in various contexts, based on an interlinking of the found elements, supported analyses about the forms, relations, and social and cultural elements present in children's games.

## CHILDREN AS ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS

Contemporarily, by focusing once again on childhood, the sociological discourse initiated a critical review on the socialization concept. Children started to be analyzed as actors in socialization and not as passive recipients of adult socialization, and to support, as Sarmento (2008, p. 20) explains, that “relations of class, gender and ethnicity are associated with interindividual characteristics that make the process of transmission and reception of social knowledge, norms and values much more complex than that which the traditional conceptualization of socialization proposes”.

Most traditional works about peer culture, based on socialization concepts supported in a functionalist vision of culture, understand these cultures as shared and internalized values and norms that guide behavior and share an “individualist doctrine that considers children's social development solely as the isolated internalization of adults' knowledge and abilities by the child” (Corsaro, 2011, p. 31). These perspectives would also make it impossible to consider socialization as “a process of appropriation, reinvention and reproduction”, in which “[...] the importance of collective and joint activity — how children negotiate, share and create culture with adults and among themselves — must be recognized” (Corsaro, 1992 *apud* James, Jenks and Prout, 1998).

The growing expansion of serving children collectively at institutions, before they enter school, and in alternance with family contexts, contributes to destabilizing the generalized vision that their socialization occurs in the family, leading to the problematization of the socialization traditional concept that is understood,



according to Ferreira (2004a, p. 15), “as a universal and univocal process, exclusively conducted by adults who lead them, according to clearly defined objectives and in benefit of social reproduction”.

By having their social relations organized and regulated in educational contexts, children, as Ferreira (2004b) explains, are positioned in the co-presence of a variety of others: other children; other adults (professionals); other space(s), time(s); objects and activities that define a collective and public order; and other social relations. This variety of others, according to the author, makes face-to-face interactions compulsory, impelling children to action — in which their concepts and experiences in family and in the world intervene —, as well as confrontations with the conceptions of peers and adults.

As Prout (2004, p. 16) said, children come to be “[...] confronted with various opposing, complementary and diverging values and perspectives presented by parents, schools, social communication media, consumption society, and peers”. And in these conditions, people responsible for their well-being come to have less power to control and guide these factors as a whole, characterizing a “dual socialization” amid which children actively seek “individually and collectively, to give coherence and meaning to the world in which they live”.

Thus, socialization processes have become increasingly complex and contribute to children’s protagonism. As Ferreira (2004a, p. 15) also clarifies, these processes occur in multiple and not necessarily convergent forms, protagonized by the children themselves when they try to administer the heterogeneity of their activities, roles, identities, and social positions. Aiming to give meaning to, within the collective dimension sphere, processes referenced to the adult world and to the institutional order defined by the educator, children appropriate interpretatively, selectively and creatively, through active participation in networks of intra and intergenerational sociability, symmetrically constructing a common place aimed at the children’s interests, in which they (re)produce their own social world, particularly in games.

By defining the individual as a singular construction of the social that crosses different socialization contexts incorporating different forms of acting, Lahire (2002) affirms that socialization schematic representations are contradicted by various empiric facts:

What we live with our parents, at school, with friends, with workmates, with members of the same political, religious or cultural association, is not necessarily cumulative and synthesizable in a simple manner...It is not necessary to postulate a logic of absolute discontinuity by presupposing that these concepts are radically different from each other, and that actors constantly skip from one interaction to another, from one domain of existence to another, without any sense of continuity, it can be empirically considered and found — that all these experiences are not systematically coherent, homogeneous nor totally compatible and that, nevertheless, we are their carriers. (Lahire, 2002, p. 31)

The family universe homogeneity, Lahire (2002, p. 32) clarifies, is presupposed, but never demonstrated. Whether it is relative or exacerbated, heterogeneity “[...] is always irreducibly at the core of the family configuration, which is never a perfect total institution”. And experiences such as the daycare one, a universe different from that of the family, questions the idea of succession or primary-secondary overlapping: “How is it not possible to see that children at daycare from a very young age learn from the first months of life that the same thing is not expected from them and that they are not treated identically here and there?” (Lahire, 2002, p. 32). According to the author, there are only rare cases that enable stating the existence of a coherent family *habitus*, capable of producing general dispositions totally guided to the same directions.

Therefore, upon circulating in an active and participatory manner in different contexts — including, childhood education institutions —, children experience increasingly complex processes, and we know little about how it is for them to act in distinct contexts, frequently marked by social inequality, among adults and their peers. In fact, the complexity that constitutes their social situation is not traditionally considered by pedagogies that aim to establish social framings. In this study, we seek to expand the understanding about children’s experiences in social contexts organized with various social and cultural logics, considering play as a path for the research of children’s social constitution.

## CHILDREN’S SOCIAL CONSTITUTION IN THE CONTOURS OF PLAY

Theoretical perspectives that understand play in an idealized manner as a positive, natural phenomenon, and/or as an antithesis of objective and rational thinking, have been targets of questioning and criticisms since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, we highlight the importance of the historical-cultural current contributions, more specifically of one of its theorists, Vigotski (2008, 2009), who changed a concept that play is a natural activity conducted to satisfy children’s instincts.

In the last decades, although in different manners, studies reaffirmed and expanded knowledge about play as a significant activity in children’s subjective social and cultural constitution and emphasized the relevance of ludic cultures and play among the social actions of children aged 0 to 6 years old. Aware of the diversity and complexity of the theoretical production about play, we opted to briefly situate some references that are important for understanding the complexity of games produced by boys and girls in the studied group.

After the interaction with colleagues in pre-school, according to William Corsaro (2002, p. 115), children produce the first of a series of peer cultures, including socio-dramatic play or role playing, defined by the author as “play in which children collaboratively produce activities of ‘make-believe’ that are related with experiences of their real lives (for example, family and occupational routines)”.

As Corsaro (2011, p. 128) reveals in his studies, children actively participate in cultural routines<sup>13</sup> produced in collectivity, however, although they have an active role in the production of cultural routines with adults, they usually occupy subordinated positions and are exposed to a much larger range of cultural information than they can process or comprehend. For this reason, the *interpretive reproduction* approach presents the hypothesis “that important characteristics of peer cultures arise and are developed as a consequence of children’s attempts to give meaning, and to a certain extent, resist adulthood” (Corsaro, 2011, p. 128). It is through “collective production and participation in routines that children become members of their peer cultures and of the adulthood where they are situated” (Corsaro, 2011, p. 128).

Also disagreement with concepts that fail to consider the social dimension of human activity in play, Gilles Brougère (2002, p. 20) explains that: “Playing is not an internal activity of the individual, but an activity doted with accurate social significance that, like others, requires learning”. This learning begins with the *other* (the closest adults and children) and introduces baby into the particular space and time of play. The author presents the hypothesis of a ludic culture and explains that those who play must share this culture to be able to play:

The child constructs his/her ludic culture by playing. It is the set of his/her accumulated ludic experience, beginning with the first play as a baby [...], that constitutes his/her ludic culture. This experience is acquired through the participation in games with companions, through observation of other children, through increasingly greater manipulation of play objects. [...] The child’s development determines possible experiences, but it does not produce the ludic culture by itself. This is originated from social interactions [...]. (Brougère, 2002, p. 26)

Therefore, it does not involve a transfer of this experience to individuals, considering that they are co-builders, social subjects who produce the ludic culture, which in turn is continuously fed by elements from the outside that do not come from the play. Thus, ludic culture is not isolated from the general culture: “This influence is multiform and begins with the environment, the material conditions. Prohibitions of parents, teachers, space made available at school, city, house will weigh on this ludic experience”. Brougère (2002, p. 28) affirms. But the process is indirect, because by playing, the child *interprets* the elements inserted. For the author, play and ludic culture contribute to the child’s socialization process, as do all her experiences, and they are constituted in a cultural process rich enough to deserve analysis.

Manuela Ferreira (2002) produced an ethnography that also made evident the condition of children as individual and collective social actors in an institution of early childhood education. The need to go beyond the vision of children’s play as “[...] preparation for adult life, to another that recognizes its value in the present, as a fluent form of social construction of their children’s worlds through participation in activities situated in the social context,” is emphasized by Ferreira (2004a,

13 Among the wide variety of cultural routines, Corsaro (2011) highlights the *games* between adults and babies that incite children to actively participate in routines since birth.

p. 198), added to the understanding that the “ludic and nearly ethereal perspective of this activity” should be reviewed, because it leads to the comprehension that “domination, sexism, social inequality and power” are not part of it.

Playing is thus understood as an integral part of social life and is constituted in an “interpretive process with a complex texture, in which creating reality requires negotiations of meaning, conducted by the body and language” (Ferreira, 2004a, p. 198). Moreover, due to the individual appropriation that each child realizes of the adult world, playing is a synonym for intercultural confrontation between children and struggles for affirmation and legitimation of some knowledge and practices in detriment to others. And, based on this confrontation, there is an expansion of knowledge and experiments between peers with adult social reality in an indirect manner, and of the social reality of children directly. Thus, playing is conceived “[...] as a socializing context that is relevant and significant for the peers that can, from this perspective, be seen as only giving potential to children’s responses, whether in innovative explorations, or in the routinization of roles (Sutton-Smith, 1977:236, op. cit. James, 1993:170)” (Ferreira, 2004a, p. 200).

Thus, more than understanding its rules and locating structural types and forms of play, Ferreira (2004a, p. 206) warns that describing how the collective production of the processes of interpersonal relations takes place is important, because playing as a cultural practice exposes values and realizations of children’s culture and allows them to experiment, exercise and acquire culturally valued attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge.

These theoretical perspectives help to elucidate the role of play in the appropriation of culture, and as a consequence, in the social constitution of children and of their childhoods.

## ANIMALS AS THE OTHER TO BE CARED FOR: APPROXIMATIONS WHEN PLAYING WITH GV/VI CHILDREN

The significant presence identification of actions involving care in games in which children establish quite complex relations became possible through systematic practices of observation and reflection, whose prerogative was the approximation to the children’s perspectives. The fact that social practices of care were one of the aspects widely explored by children in the studied context forced us to ask: Why do these children explore routines of caring for others and of being cared for by others? In what ways do they play of taking care of others and being cared for?

Games involving *animals as the other to be cared for* extended throughout the entire study, with similar themes and sequences of action, although they were different in terms of the stories, groupings of children, times, spaces and materials and/or toys. Let us examine one of these play sequences, produced by Mel and Natália,<sup>14</sup> which is transcribed as follows:<sup>15</sup>

14 We have decided to give the children fictitious names to respect their privacy.

15 The complete video recording lasts 16 minutes and 33 seconds, and its complete transcription is found in Rivero (2015). The decision to select only a few transcript portions of the children’s play is due to the impossibility of presenting the entire transcript, given the limits of the article.

In mid-October, I accompanied the teacher and some children — Carlos, Davi, Isabela, Mel, Miguel, Natália and Vivian — to the institution library. In that space, amid various other situations, Mel and Natália produced a game:

Mel and Natália are together and flipping through two books<sup>16</sup> that have fuzzy ducks on their covers.

Besides the book, Natália holds a stuffed duck with one of her hands.

Carlos observes the two girls.

[...]

Mel gets another book, which has a small fuzzy duck on the cover, and props it on the ground, in front of Natália.

**Mel:**<sup>17</sup> — Look, look, the duckling world.

Natália approximates the large duck (which is in her book) to the small duckling that is in Mel's book.

**Natália:** — Oooh what a little baby, little duckling...

**Mel** (as if she was the duckling): — Daddy, do you want to see my world?

**Natália** (as if she was the Father Duck): — Yes, dear.

**Mel** (as if she was the duckling): — My world is very beautiful, look at my friends (points to the images in the book).

**Natália** (as if she was the Father Duck): — I also have friends, but they are in another book.

Mel flips through the book and points to other images.

[...]

Natália places the Father Duck close to the duckling and makes the father kiss the duckling.

**Natália** (as if she was the Father Duck): — You are so pretty!

**Mel:** — It's time for the duckling to sleep, not you.

Mel lies down the book with the duckling and raises the book with the large duck, placing it alongside the Father Duck.

**Mel** (as if she was the large duck): — Let's take care of the duckling!

**Natália** (as if she was the Father Duck): — Be careful, or a dragon can come in your room.

Mel puts the duckling next to the large duck that is in her hands.

**Mel** (as if she was the other older duck): — There is no dragon here.

**Natália** (as if she was the Father Duck): — Another evil duck.

**Mel** (as if she was the Mother Duck): — Hey, you put it (referring to the duckling) here, right here, next to mommy. Natália puts it.

16 The books with which the girls play in this situation are characterized as toy-books.

17 Regarding children and adults' speech, we chose to transcribe them using formal Portuguese language, marking a distinction between what is said and what is written. However, in situations in which children have used expressions or terms that are distinct from the conventional, an attempt was made to transcribe them as faithfully as possible.

**Mel** (as if she was the Mother Duck): — No, here, here, so the duckling stays warm. Oh, let me explain to you, give it to me.

Mel gets the duckling that was with Natália and puts it where she thinks best, while Natália watches it.

**Mel** (as if she was the Mother Duck): — Ok, now the baby is warm enough to sleep.

Natália gets a small object from the floor:

**Natália:** — Food, daddy, mommy. Fooood!

(Episode registered on 10/19/2011)

Mel and Natália frequently pretend they are *animals* or play with animals, but each one of them had other children as partners, and when the make-believe involved these characters they were not usually together. Toy-books, with stuffed animals in their structure, seemed to have been decisive so that the girls would begin this situation and make them objects of their play, as Brougère (2004, p. 258) explains:

[...] many games begin through contact with toys. [...] The toy seems to be one of the ways of introducing play, of developing this second-degree space of make-believe [...]. One cannot forget that it involves, to become an object of play (and not simply of the environment), the child's decision to play.

The existence of a ludic culture (Brougère, 2002) specific to each child, before contact with the objects, is another factor essential to the realization of play. And the ludic culture of Natália and Mel, combined with the dynamics of their previous play, has contributed to the rise of that situation, which that specific play would probably not take place without it.

But what clues do we have about the previous play of the two girls, found in the context of early-childhood education and in their family contexts? And what does the participation in a play with these characteristics mean in relation to their games in these contexts?

Mel was a white girl who attended the institution since she was 1 and 6 months old, and she was among the older children of GV/VI. During the observations, it was possible to see that she established relations and communicated fluently with most of the children in the group, and participated in various games that they produced, in which she generally occupied a prominent position. Mel frequently suggested the plot and the characters to be represented in the play, and she usually assumed a central role and had significant influence on its direction. In the institution, games with animals seemed very significant to her, and she usually assumed the role of a mother who took care and protected her children.

Socio-economically speaking,<sup>18</sup> in relation to the other children's families, Mel's family had one of the most favorable positions. In her family context, Mel often watched cartoons on paid TV, played with her dog, with stuffed animals and other toys, and also played in open spaces like the beach and the yard of her house. During the visit, when she showed her toys, Mel highlighted the stuffed animals

18 This information comes from registration forms and field notes.

and invited the researcher to play with them as *animal caretakers*. In addition, she presented her dog, who she mentioned regularly.

Natália was a white girl of foreign nationality, who had been attending the school for two years. She was among the youngest children at GV/VI. In the institutional context, she played mostly with Carlos, but also with Mel. When Carlos and/or Mel were playing with other children in the group, Natália would interact with children with whom she did not regularly play with. She showed strong interest in animals and played with elements of this universe, especially with Carlos, but there was no mother or father in her play, they would generally assume the roles of animals, like cats, cheetahs and dogs and would interact. Social practices of care were not observed as significant in these situations. In addition, Natália chose stuffed animals to play with instead of dolls, and demonstrated strong curiosity about dinosaurs. Although her family context was not visited, she mentioned some aspects of her domestic life and at times mentioned her dog, showing strong affection for it.

Thus, in the previously described game, Natália and Mel revived elements from previous games, producing a combination of elements from their previous experiences. Vigotski (2009, p. 17), when talking about a situation in which a 3 and a half-year old boy created a story about when he saw a lame man walking on a street, contributes to understanding the *combinatory or creative activity*:

In this case, the combinatory activity of imagination is extremely clear. We have here a situation created by the child. All the elements of this situation, of course, are known by the child based on his/her previous experience, otherwise he/she could not have come up with them. However, the combination of these elements is something new, created, that belongs to the child him/herself, and does not simply reproduce what the child had the opportunity of observing or seeing. It is this ability of combining elements to produce a structure, to combine the old in new ways, which is the creation basis. (Vigotski, 2004, p.12)

In the highlighted game, Natália, who usually imitated animals, did it again, but now she represented a duck, an animal that was not the one she usually played. When she saw Mel calling her attention to the duck, Natália took the initiative to communicate as if she was the duckling's father, trying a different social role than those she usually assumed.

Mel, at first, by pretending to be a duckling and establishing a horizontal relationship with Natália, also changed the way she acted, given that in other plays involving animals, her main function was maternal. In this play, however, Mel returned to positions that were very familiar to her and also brought to that situation elements related to social practices of care that, as we mentioned, were not present in Natália's plays. Mel announced this revival by saying: *It's time for the duckling to go to sleep, not you*. And, then, by simultaneously assuming the duckling mother's role by saying to the Father Duck (Natália): *Let's take care of the duckling*. Thus, upon representing the duckling, Mel broke some patterns, but also revived aspects that were quite present in the collective routines in which she participated, characterized



by sequences of action in which *care* stood out and interlinked with expressions of affection, permeated by an objectivity in the forms of acting towards the duckling.

It is also possible to identify, in the analyzed recordings, some experiments by the girls regarding how to be a man and a woman, mother and father. Natália was willing to play the father, something that was not common among girls, and exercised paternity through expressions of attention and affection. Mel, on the other hand, played a mother who assumed a position of command, concerned with guiding the father to provide warmth and comfort for the duckling. By representing the father and mother in this way, Natália and Mel destabilized a “[...]” concept based on binary oppositions and dichotomies, reason belongs to masculinity, while emotion belongs to femininity” (Buss-Simão, 2013, p. 188), revealing that the games of enacting roles reveal fertile spaces for experimentations related to gender:

Role-playing also allows the child to learn how different types of people in society act and relate with each other. One aspect of great importance for children is gender, the expectations about the behavior of boys and girls and the way that roles are socially stereotyped by gender. [...] children do not accept these stereotypes, but challenge and refine them. Thus, expectations about gender are not simply inculcated in children by adults, but are socially constructed by children in interactions with adults and among each other. (Corsaro, 2009, p. 34)

Mauss (1974, p. 211), when addressing body techniques, which he conceived as “the ways that men, society by society and in a traditional form, know how to make use of their bodies”, emphasized the *imitating act* linked to prestige, to trust and to the authority of the person to be imitated:

Children, as adults, imitate acts that they have seen as successful in people they trust and who have authority over them. The act is imposed from the outside, from above, even if it is an exclusively biological act and concerns the body. The individual borrows the series of movements with which he/she composes from the act executed in front of him/her or with him/her by others. It is precisely in this notion of personal prestige that the act is ordered, authorized and proven as to the imitating individual, who the entire social element is found. In the act of imitation that follows, the entire psychological element and biological element are found. (Mauss, 1974, p. 215)

Thus, Natália and Mel’s decision to play with ducks shows, on one hand, as we have said, to be linked to pre-existing dynamics in their play with animals, and on the other, allows an expansion of knowledge and experiments about roles and practices existing in the social reality, besides the establishment of new relations in the realm of the children’s social group of which they are a part.

As the play continued intensely, Mel proposes to Natália a change in the roles assumed until then, as revealed by this sequence of the interactive episode:

**Mel:** — Wait, I had an idea... Natália, maybe we can play of taking care of ducks.

**Natália:** — Ok!

**Mel:** — Oh, Natália, how about... oh, Natália, I wanted to play with you, like, oh..., I care for them and you help me.

**Natália:** — OK!

Natália gets the books.

**Natália:** — I am going to put the duck to sleep, lying down with the duckling. I will put my little lion to sleep (referring to the stuffed baby lion, which she was holding since before beginning of the play).

**Mel:** — Put it here... a pet lion...

**Natália:** — What is a pet?

Mel tries to prop one book on the other, so that the animals sleep inside it.

**Mel:** — But it was more ... Pet? Pet is a small animal that you have.

**Natália:** — But it was my baby. I was a dinosaur rex that could become a human and could also become a lion.

Natália jumps and makes a sound like a dinosaur (by doing this, she goes away from Mel, to the other side of the Library).

**Mel:** — Oh, Natália, come over here, come here, come here Natália.

Natália returns, crawling on all fours over the rug.

**Natália:** — I became a lion.

**Mel:** — No, you have to be my helper.

Natália goes to where the little duck book is and puts it on her lap.

**Natália:** — Ok!

**Mel:** — Get the Mother Duck and the father, and I will take the duckling.

**Natália:** — I will take the mother and father on my lap too!

Natália crawls on her knees over the rug, in circles. Mel goes to the other side of the room.

**Mel:** — Now let's put the baby in a very soft place..., stay here with me Natália. Natália goes to Mel, crawling on hands and knees, while she coughs and jumps.

[...]

Other children arrive and stay at the library door, talking with the teacher (who was leaving the space). By seeing the looks of the group towards the game of Natália and Mel, the teacher explains to them: \_ Mel and Natália are playing. When she hears this, Alice enters the library.

Mel complements the information from the teacher, looking at Alice.

**Mel:** — Of the little duck guardian.

[...]

**Alice:** — Can I play too?

**Mel:** — Ok, but first I am going to read.

**Alice:** — Can I be the little dog?

Mel does not answer (she seems to be thinking about Alice's proposal).

**Natália:** — There is no little dog.

**Mel:** — But there could be. You (referring to Natália), to take care of the ducklings, have a little pet lion, and now I can also have a duck and a dog helper. Alice immediately begins to walk as if she was a puppy and she barks.  
(Episode registered on 10/19/2011)

In this second moment, Mel and Natália have established other agreements that caused changes in the play, assuring the continuity of the interactive episode. The change proposed by Mel allowed them to continue the actions of taking care of animals, without threatening her position in the game. However, by assuming the role of duck helper, Natália did not limit herself to Mel's decisions. She showed resistance to the condition that was placed on her. Thus, in addition to becoming a helper, Natália announced that she would be a *dinosaur rex that could become a human, and could also become a lion*, and her movements and gestures revealed these transformations, either into a lion, or into a dinosaur, characters and dynamics that she had previously explored in other situations of play.

The possibility to become another also gave Natália the chance to reshape her role as helper of the duck caregiver, which was limited to a human form. By becoming an animal, she freed herself from the condition of subordination and provided another dynamic to the plot. At the same time, Mel, who was used to steering the direction of the plots of the play and the ways that other children should act, upon interacting with Natália, tried a differentiated situation, characterized by a resistance that carried proposals that were apparently capable of making her review her own suggestions and incorporate expansions.

The dialog between the two girls expose the tension, as well as the concessions made by both, which allowed the play continuity. In the relations established between the baby duck (Mel), the Father Duck (Natália), and the Mother Duck (Mel) and in a second moment, between the duck caregiver (Mel) and her helper-dinosaur-human-lion (Natália), we have found not only ways of being, feeling and acting of adults and children, but also indications of forms of acting and relating with and among animals. Hence, the representation is highlighted by elements that are referenced in adult education and care practices that are visible in actions of protecting, comforting and expressing affection, expressed in speech, in intonation of voice and in the girls' corporal postures. These forms of acting and relating are also present among animal characters in children's literature, in cartoons, and other media productions and cultural artefacts, which present them in the molds of a Western human family. Mel and Natália reveal some of these forms in their speech, movements and gestures when playing.

It can be seen that Mel and Natália use a multiplicity of knowledges and construct a complex plot, in which they mix and combine various elements from relations that they establish in the family context, in the early childhood education context, in the local context (where animals and elements of nature are part of people's lives), and of broader culture, like the media culture.

In this game, they give clues about the meanings that they attribute to care. Situations like this suggest that the approximation to play can also become a children's learning of the word and thinking:

Childhood speaks a language that is not heard. Childhood pronounces a word that is not understood. Childhood thinks a thought that is not thought. Giving space to this language, learning this word, responding this thinking can be an opportunity not only to give space to what is decent, primordial and passionate to this word of childhood, but also to educate ourselves, the opportunity to not always locate others in another land, in the land-less, the foreign, and be able to leave at some time, at least a little, of our fatherland, of our comfortable space. (Kohan, 2007, p. 131)

By constructing the characters and their respective actions in an active and creative manner, giving life to duck caregivers, to a dinosaur rex that can transform into a human or a lion, to a dragon that can come into the room and threaten the duckling, and to a dog helper, the two girls do not limit themselves to imitating the world around them, showing, as Corsaro (2011, p. 36) expressed, that “[...] they make an effort to interpret or give meaning to their culture and participate in it”.

Other children directly expressed the desire to play with Mel and Natália, taking the initiative to ask if they can participate in the play, but it was Alice who added to the initial question a proposal to play a certain character. Alice’s action interrupted the game flow, and a negotiation was needed to solve the conflict provoked by her interrogations.

Alice did not usually play with Natália, while Mel and Alice, in various situations, demonstrated great satisfaction to be together and to share moments of play. How did Alice’s insertion, in a game like this, “dialog” with the play in which she was used to acting, in a family context and in the institution of early childhood education?

Socio-economically, Alice’s family occupied an intermediary position between the more and less wealthy families in the group. At home, watching videos of children’s films and various telenovelas seemed to be her main activities, although she would occasionally play with her younger brother and a female cousin. In addition, although she lived in a house with a large outdoor space and close to the beach, Alice did not explore these spaces on a daily basis.

Alice and Mel attended the institution for early childhood education since she was approximately 1 year and 6 months, and she was also among the oldest children at GV/VI. She moved among the adults and children in the group and interacted and communicated freely with both. Hence, Alice participated in various forms of play, in which she would assume a variety of roles, depending on the plot being developed. In the play under analysis, it seemed that, by representing the puppy (and in other situations, such as the traditional *Boi de Mamão* theatrical dance, in which she represented animal characters and other roles), Alice had the opportunity to express herself ludically and intensely, differently than how she expressed herself in various moments when an adult-like rationality predominated.

As this situation was being developed, therefore, it became clear that Mel, Natália and Alice used knowledge, forms of expression and representation revealed in games in which they participated with a certain regularity. Nevertheless, the analysis of their interactions shows how much the girls also experienced different modes of acting than those that they usually explored, which only became object of attention and reflection because we accompanied them and established approximations to the multiplicity of their forms of play.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

To make believe they were babies or little animals and to experiment being in the place of those who execute the actions of feeding, bathing and putting them to sleep and protecting them from danger revealed to be an object of interest, attention and exploration among most children in the group. Adult characters stood out in their representations, as well as babies and small animals, and processes of care that exhibited attention, affection, solidarity and protection, as well as manifestations of power and control.

Considering the limits of this article, even though we have examined a single episode by accompanying the diversity of types of games related to caring for others and being cared for by others, we have observed that care practices were aimed at boys and girls who represented animals (like a little tiger, cats and dogs), characters from cartoon series (like Pikachu), and characters from family and domestic contexts (like children, younger siblings and babies). In addition, stuffed animals, baby dolls (and other types of dolls) and children of another group (who were approximately two years old) also mobilized actions of care during the play. Meanwhile, the caregivers, from this range of characters, were boys and girls who, in different forms, represented fathers, mothers, older siblings and owners of animals. In certain moments, the children combined some of these characters into a single interactive situation.

Playing of taking care of others allowed experimenting acting in the place of those who provide care, making decisions and having access to various spaces and materials. In addition, to be cared for by others, who in the realm of play were other children, allowed somehow to not only relive this experience, but also to explore it with their peers in other ways, by being subordinated or insubordinate.

The scope and significance of practices and relations associated with care in different contexts of children and adults' lives probably explains the enormous mobilization and attraction that they inspire. Since babies, children are usually the objects of care, they also observe other children being cared for by adults, and at times, they participate in games with older children, in which these practices are present. Moreover, in oral tradition, literature and contemporary media productions, not only children, but baby animals and various beings exhibit human characteristics and receive attention and care in the forms of those aimed to human babies. Various objects and toys also provoke children to imitate the daily actions of adults, including social practices of care.

Social practices, including care, take various forms, depending on the structural conditions related to factors, such as class, gender, ethnicity, and culture. The combination of indications about the trajectories of some GV/VI children in their family contexts and in their games at the institution reveals that they were carriers of social practices of education and care derived from a socialization produced in various and unequal environments, characterized by heterogeneous and even contradictory relations (Lahire, 2002). In addition, it is noteworthy that children, in their games and in other situations, were very active, protagonizing the social construction of their singularities, based on relations established in their peer group, in a frequent and durable manner. Thus, they find, as the author emphasizes, "their

own modality of behavior as a function of the configuration in which they are inserted” (Setton, 2004, p. 321).

The analyses reaffirm play as an activity of intercultural confrontation, where children use a multiplicity of knowledge and construct complex stories, in which they mix and combine various elements that come from relations established in the realm of the local context and broader culture.

The study also revealed the complexity of playing and the need for a questioning and engaged attitude, combined with an approximation and involvement that allows recognizing — in gestures, in movement, in tones of voice, in forms of organization of objects and toys — content and repertoires of play, which are derived from children’s different social and cultural insertions.

Finally, even though we found common elements to children’s games, by approximating to them, we found distinct and complex meanings and significations produced in their trajectories, based on the relations that they establish among peers, with adults and broader culture.

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