

Playing and teaching activities in preschool autism spectrum disorder children

As atividades do brincar e do ensinar em crianças com tea na educação infantil

Las actividades del jugar y del enseñar en niños con tea en la educación infantil

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to investigate the understandings produced by preschool teachers about playing activities, and to analyze the implication of these in the organization and execution of teaching activities for children with autism spectrum disorder enrolled in preschool. It is a research-action in which two students and their respective teachers and monitors participated. Data production emerged from classroom observation and records and from a focal group with the professionals. From a discursive textual analysis the following categories were derived: understandings about playing; and playing and teaching autistic spectrum disorder children in preschool. The results reveal that the conceptions about playing expressed by the professionals have an impact on their pedagogical practice as well as revealing the importance and potential these conceptions acquire in playing and teaching activities in preschool.


Keywords: Autism. Human Development. Inclusive Education.

RESUMO

Esta pesquisa investigou as compreensões produzidas por professoras que atuam na educação infantil sobre a atividade do brincar e analisou suas implicações na organização e execução da atividade de ensinar em crianças com transtorno do espectro autista matriculadas na pré-escola. Trata-se de uma pesquisa-ação, em que participaram dois alunos e suas professoras e monitoras. Os dados emergiram de observações e registros da sala de aula e de um grupo focal com as profissionais. Com base na análise textual discursiva foram construídas duas categorias: compreensões sobre o brincar; e o brincar e o ensinar na educação infantil em crianças com TEA. Resultados mostram que as compreensões das profissionais sobre o brincar têm impacto na sua prática pedagógica, bem como revelam a importância e o potencial que elas adquirem na atividade do brincar e do ensinar na educação infantil.

Palavras-chave: Autismo. Desenvolvimento Humano. Educação Inclusiva.

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RESUMEN

Esta investigación investigó las comprensiones producidas por profesoras que actúan en la Educación Infantil sobre la actividad del jugar, y analizó las implicaciones de esas en la organización y ejecución de la actividad de enseñar en niños con Trastornos del Espectro Autista matriculados en preescolar. Se trata de una investigación-acción, en que participan dos alumnos y sus profesoras y monitoras. La producción de datos emergió de observaciones y registros de la clase y de un grupo de enfoque con las profesionales. A Partir del Análisis Textual Discursivo fueron construidas dos categorías: Comprensiones sobre el jugar; y El jugar y el enseñar en la Educación Infantil en niños con Trastornos del Espectro Autista. Resultados revelan que las concepciones sobre el jugar, expresadas por las profesionales, tienen impacto en su práctica pedagógica bien como revelan la importancia y el potencial que ellas adquieren en la actividad del jugar y del enseñar en la Educación Infantil.

Palabras clave: Autismo. Desarrollo Humano. Educación Inclusiva.

INTRODUCTION

The theme of playing in childhood occupies an important space in discussions and productions in different theoretical lines and professional fields. Cotonhoto, Rossetti and Missawa (2019) emphasize how playing and games constitutes a pedagogical resource for learning and developing skills in children, whether cognitive, social, motor or affective. These authors highlight that Frederico Froebel (1782–1852), creator of Kindergarten, was the first pedagogue to systematize a pedagogical proposal for this stage of teaching, establishing play and games as central elements of his educational theory (Cotonhoto, Rossetti and Missawa, 2019). Different scholars recognize the pedagogical potential of games/role-playing for the development of a child's psyche, including Leontiev (2004), Vygostky (2012), and Elkonin (2017).

Early childhood education (ECE), as the first stage of basic education (BE), mandatory from the age of four for all children (Brasil, 2013), including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Brasil, 2008; 2012), has a fundamental role in the constitution of children's psyche. In addition to the child's access to school, what is under discussion is the issue of the content to be taught so that each child can develop their maximum psychic potential, and the pedagogical procedures to be deployed so that they can appropriate the knowledge taught, considering the period of their development (Magalhães and Mesquita, 2014).

In our view, it is not just any play and/or game that will enable the development of the psyche, since it is the result of human activity. Authors such as Leontiev (2004; 2016), Martins (2015), Elkonin (2017), and Vygostky (2008; 2012) sustain the idea that it is through activity that men adapt to nature; they modify it based on their needs (they create objects, build homes) and, in this process, man transforms himself as a human person. Leontiev (2004) highlights that each generation begins its life in a world of objects and phenomena created by previous generations, and appropriates the world's resources by participating in work, production and various forms of social activity, developing, thus, properly human abilities.

We understand that it is only through the appropriation of culture that the child will develop human skills, differentiating themselves from animals through the development of higher psychological functions — HPFs (Vygostky, 2008) or neoformations (Leontiev, 2004), defined by Pino Sirgado (2000) as "internalized external relations". The main characteristic of the appropriation process is to develop new psychic abilities and functions in man. Leontiev (2004) defines brain

neoformations as “the material substrate of specific skills and functions that are formed in the course of man’s appropriation of the world of objects and phenomena created by humanity, that is, of culture” (p. 271). According to Leontiev (2004), new formations only develop in the relationship between humans through human activity.

When studying this process, the author describes some stages of psychic development and the main or dominant activities of each of them. Elkonin (2017), based on these ideas, systematized a theory about the periodization of human development. He names five stages from the child’s birth, which are: 1. the baby’s emotional communication (the main activity at this stage consists of direct emotional communication with adults); 2. manipulative object activity (early childhood — object activity, in which the assimilation of socially elaborated procedures of action with objects takes place); 3. role play (preschool age in which the main activity is playing in its most expanded form); 4. the study activity (school age — the study activity allows the appropriation of new knowledge); and 5. intimate personal communication and professional/study activity (period of adolescence in which communication activity is related to establishing relationships with colleagues (moral and ethical standards) and activity directed towards the future — professional/study).

The periods described by Elkonin (2017) contribute to our reflection on the child’s development in their interaction with the social environment. The author highlights that the transformation of activities into main ones, at certain times, does not eliminate those that already existed in the child, this being a dynamic and flexible process. He sustains the need to overcome the naturalistic approach to the development of the psyche, which implies a change in understanding the interrelationship between children and society.

Magalhães (2018) warns that, if it is through activity that we satisfy our needs, it is also through activity that the psyche develops. Therefore, the quality of psychic development depends on the quality of education offered to the child since birth, and it is essential that the teacher is aware, understands this process and develops *educational work* that enables the achievement of higher levels of psychic development. For Saviani (2012, p. 13), *educational work* can be understood as “the act of producing, directly and intentionally, in each singular individual, the humanity that is produced historically and collectively by all men”. For the author, the object of education refers, “on the one hand, to the identification of cultural elements that need to be assimilated by individuals of the human species so that they become human and, on the other hand and concomitantly, to the discovery of the most adequate ways to achieve this objective” (Saviani, 2003, p. 13).

Following this theoretical line, Asbahr and Nascimento (2013) and Magalhães (2018) affirm that, in the schooling process, it is not up to the school to wait for the child to develop; rather it needs to create the necessary conditions for this process to occur, because, as highlighted by Martins (2015), the guiding activities proposed by teachers must consider the periodization of development. Thus, ECE, especially the preschool period, is the time when play (role games) can take place more fully, favoring the development of HPFs.

Therefore, not just any teaching promotes development. Saviani (2020) alerts us to the fact that, when educating, it is necessary for teachers to consider the physical, biological, psychological and cultural reality of the child. The preschool phase is a time when reality opens up to the child. During an activity, especially a game, the child manages to overcome the limits of manipulation, establishing a relationship in which he/she has greater agency, for example, pretending, creating stories, driving a car, pointing a pistol, without this being possible in his/her objective reality, since he/she is still a child. The child also does not care about this issue, since his/her basic needs are being met by adults (Leontiev, 2016).

Given these considerations, in this study we question: What are the readings of the activity of play produced by teachers who work in ECE, and what are the implications of these for the organization and development of the teaching activity for children with ASD enrolled in preschool?

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual on Mental Disorders — DSM-5, ASD is characterized as a neurodevelopmental disorder, in which the child, from the first years of life, presents impairments in the socio-communicational areas (communication and social interaction) and in behavioral aspects regarding restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, activities and interests (APA, 2014). Since it is a spectrum, these characteristics are present in different ways and intensities in each person; however, in general, they end up affecting the child's relationship with other people and the way they understand and connect to the social environment.

This discussion is pertinent due to the increase in children with ASD enrolled in ECE, according to literature data (Salles, 2018; Araujo, 2019; Sarmanho, 2021), and also due to the scarcity of national studies dedicated to understanding the theme of play, as evidenced in the literature review carried out by Albuquerque and Benitez (2020). The school plays a fundamental role in the development of HPFs and/or neoformations, and it is necessary that children with ASD, in playing situations, also engage in activity so that development can occur.

Dainez, Smolka and Souza (2022) highlight that, historically, it was difficult for them to effectively occupy their place as students in the common classroom. Based on an *a priori* assumption of incapacity, for these children were left with the spaces of specialized institutions, where they remained segregated.

It was with the promulgation of the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education — PNEEPEI (Brasil, 2008) that new forms of insertion and participation in schooling processes were made possible for these students. Dainez, Smolka and Souza (2022) assert that the school distinguishes itself from philanthropic-assistance institutions, presenting itself as a microcosm of human life. It is a place of multiple relationships and the appropriation of knowledge that makes it possible to expand the role of people with disabilities in social practice. They state that “the position of student thus implies the position of citizen. In this way, the teaching relationships experienced in the school environment become a driving force of human development” (p. 13).

The inclusion of children with ASD in ECE is a global educational reality. Based on research carried out in the Bank of Theses and Dissertations of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES, 2022), the Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD, 2022) and the association of the descriptors “autistic spectrum disorder” OR “autism”, with the terms play, higher psychological functions, psyche and ECE, it was found that there are few studies that seek to understand how the process of psyche development occurs in these children through the activity of playing (child) and teaching (teacher).

One of these studies was developed by Salles (2018), who sought to understand how the forms of pedagogical mediation developed by the teacher contribute to the participation of children with autism in play activities. The participants were a teacher/player and a child with ASD. The author concluded that pedagogical mediation could favor the development of children with autism, enabling them to expand their relationship with the social environment.

Another study was carried out by Araujo (2019), who focused on the relational aspects of children with ASD. Seventeen children participated, ten without a diagnosis, six with autism and one with Down syndrome. The results show that when a child with autism does not form a bond with an adult, their action in the environment is impoverished and limited only to their interests. Once a bond is established with an adult, however, their action in the environment is enriched, expanding their possibilities of action and interaction with peers, toys and games. The author highlights that in the dimension of personal occupation in social space there is a distance between children with ASD and their peers.

In the study developed by Silva (2017), the focus was on the role playing of children with autism. The research was developed in a special class attended by six students with ASD aged four to six years old, within a public ECE school in the Federal District. Based on microgenetic analysis, the author highlights that, contrary to traditional literature, it was possible to verify that children with autism, in a qualitatively different way, not only play, but also create, imagine and assume roles.

We highlight that, although the studies carried out by Silva (2017), Salles (2018) and Araujo (2019) have historical-cultural psychology as their theoretical perspective, the question that guided the investigation was different from that of the present research. In addition to the studies described, one by Mattos (2019) was also found which aimed to build a notebook with pedagogical activities for teachers in order to contribute to the process of inclusion of children with ASD. The research by Sarmanho (2021) aimed to understand the social representations of teachers and facilitators regarding the games of children with ASD and how they materialize in pedagogical practices. The research revealed the teachers' difficulties in approaching and mediating the games of children with ASD, which the author attributes to the social representations that the participants had about these children and their lack of experience and of initial and continued training on the topic.

We justify the importance of this research by considering that play in the preschool period is the main activity for the child's development. We seek to contribute to the understanding of how the psychic development of children with ASD happens, thus qualifying the training/professional performance of the subjects included in this process, taking into account the movement of action/reflection/action that the study set out to accomplish. Our goal was to investigate the understandings about the activity of playing produced by teachers who work in ECE, and to analyze the implications of these in the organization and development of the activity of teaching ASD children enrolled in preschool.

METHOD

DESIGN

This study is qualitative in nature, in the action research modality. In relation to action research, Carr and Kemmis (1988) highlight that it provides an opportunity to understand teachers' practice, their theories, interpretations and meanings based on their teaching experiences, enabling reflection and the production of new meanings and actions for their pedagogical work. According to Marie Thiollent and Colette (2014), action research can be understood as a self-training strategy, which involves the participation of the interested parties themselves, ensuring a higher effectiveness of solutions.

PARTICIPANTS

The study participants were two boys diagnosed with ASD and enrolled in ECE in the municipal network of a city in the northwest region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, two teachers and two monitors of these children, who at that time of data collection acted as specialized companions for students with ASD, as recommended in Law 12,764 (Brasil, 2012). It should be noted that all names used to identify them are fictitious, in order to preserve the identity of the participants.

REGARDING THE CHILDREN

Adriano is a four-year-old boy who was diagnosed with ASD at the age of three while attending kindergarten II at *Escola Amor*. He has attended ECE this school since he was six months old, where

he was enrolled in the morning shift at preschool I at the time of the observations. He is an only child and lives with his parents. In addition to the school shift, Adriano is accompanied by the teacher from the Specialized Educational Service Center (CAEE) at the municipal ECE. In the health area, there is support from an occupational therapist, speech therapist and psychologist. His interests are letters and numbers; he knows and repeats the alphabet in Portuguese, English and Russian. His communication is verbal, focusing on English.

Leandro is a five-year-old boy who was diagnosed with ASD when he was three, while attending nursery II at *Escola Liberdade*. He has attended the ECE school since he was six months old, when he was enrolled in the morning shift at preschool II at the time of the observations. Leandro is an only child and lives with his parents. In addition to the school shift, he is accompanied by the teacher from the Specialized Educational Service Center (CAEE) at the municipal ECE. In the health area, he is monitored by an occupational therapist and a speech therapist. He is interested in logic, puzzles, memory and computer games. His communication is verbal on matters that interest him.

We highlight that, at the beginning of the observations, both classes of participating children were being interspersed, with a reduction in the number of students due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation was later reestablished, allowing all students to return to school in person. Throughout the observations with Adriano and Leandro, moments of interaction were created between this researcher, the children and professionals in the school context.

REGARDING THE PARTICIPATING PROFESSIONALS

Professionals at *Escola Amor*: teacher Aline has a degree in teaching, a degree in physical education and a specialization in the field of education. She worked as a monitor for ten years and has been an ECE teacher for six. At the beginning of data production, she was away from the classroom, as she was in a risk group for the coronavirus; a situation that was soon regularized, allowing her to return to the classroom. Monitor Andréia has a teaching degree and a degree in mathematics. She works at the ECE school and as a private English teacher. In ECE she has five years of professional experience. Aline and Andréia, during the period of this research, were linked to Adriano's class at preschool I.

Professionals at *Escola Liberdade*: teacher Lígia has a teaching degree and a bachelor's degree in psychology. She worked as a monitor for ten years and has been an ECE teacher for six. Monitor Letícia has a teaching degree and a degree in pedagogy, with nine years of professional experience. Lígia and Letícia were linked to Leandro's class at preschool II.

DATA PRODUCTION PROCEDURES AND ETHICAL ASPECTS

This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University to which the authors are linked, under the number 34635520.0.0000.5350 of the Certificate of Presentation of Ethical Appreciation (CAAE). Data production took place from February to December 2021, based on *observation and intervention, by this researcher, with the teachers and children*: different moments of observation were carried out in the classes, with the goal of analyzing the games proposed by the teachers and the way the children carried out the activities, with what pedagogical intention the activities were proposed, and the signs of the students' psychic development. In addition, students' productions related to speeches, games proposed by them, drawings, graphic records, among others, were also observed and analyzed.

The children's observations were recorded in film and photos, with the goal of analyzing and registering their interactions in play and how it happened in the classroom. Furthermore, a field diary (FD) was used, which consists of a notebook in which facts, observations and important information were noted and recorded to understand the study topic.

With two teachers and two class monitors, in addition to individual contact, a focus group (FG) meeting was held, which took place through Google Meet (due to COVID-19). To hold this FG meeting, we took into account the ideas of Barbour (2009), who highlights the importance of preparing the researcher, who must develop a script and select stimuli to encourage discussion and group interaction. In this study, the FG was composed of four participants, in addition to the researcher, with the goal of reflecting on play and its role in the psychic development of children with ASD in ECE.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data produced were organized considering the theoretical assumptions of discursive textual analysis (DTA), which is characterized as a methodology for examining information that aims to produce new understandings based on discourses and phenomena (Moraes and Galiuzzi, 2020). The analysis begins with unitarization (disassembly of texts, which are separated into units of meaning), followed by the establishment of relationships, in which similar meanings are grouped based on categorization, which can generate various levels of analysis categories. In the third moment there is the production of the new emerging, in which, from the analysis, the transformation is made possible not only of the researcher's knowledge and theories, "but also of their understandings and paradigms of science, which intensely implies the transformation of the researcher and his reality" (Moraes and Galiuzzi, 2020, p. 15). Interpretation of the results was carried out with theoretical support from authors in the areas of historical-cultural psychology and historical-critical pedagogy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this item we present the results found with the DTA, from which two categories emerged: the first deals with "understandings about playing", and the second with "playing and teaching in children with ASD in ECE". Below we present these two categories.

UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT PLAYING

In this category we sought to understand how the activity of playing is conceived by ECE teachers, in order to contextualize their activity in the classroom. Leontiev (2016) and Elkonin (2017) highlight that play, especially role-play, is fundamental for the development of children's psyche at this preschool stage. Lazaretti (2017) warns that not just any game promotes a child's psychic development. Therefore, it is essential that teachers are aware of the pedagogical intentionality of the activities they propose in their classes (Lazaretti, 2017).

Lígia, when asked about the role of play in a child's development, said: "I also think how good it is to hear this thing about toys, you know, because many times we ask ourselves: will they learn even by playing?" She goes on to report: "(...) in preschool, sometimes, we feel a little demanded upon when it comes to working with records; it seems like you have to prove on paper that the child is learning, and how do you do that when the child is playing?" (FG, 2021).

This concern with the curriculum and registration is also expressed by Aline, when she states: "(...) because the curriculum is not just the ECE [control], the registration itself, so now we are working with the portfolio, which is about taking photos of the moment that happens, what's happening at that moment" (FG, 2021). It is important to highlight how much toys in preschool classes can be questioned, as teacher Lígia underlines, since, in a certain way, there is an appreciation for letters and registration; and, in addition, how much the teacher's insecurity, since they are charged with registration, makes them "doubt" their potential and the potential of the child who is learning through play.

Lígia continues: “I remember a teacher during my training at my college; she said a lot about the fundamental role of the toy, the importance of the toy as if it were the child’s job, an adult’s job, but that the child’s job is the toy (...)” (FG, 2021). This statement reveals the importance of teacher training and study, possibly related to a curricular component of historical-cultural psychology, since, from this perspective, playing with toys in the preschool stage is the child’s main activity (Leontiev, 2016; Elkonin, 2017). Despite, however, Lígia’s knowledge about the importance of toys at this stage, on a visit to her classroom she reports her concern by stating: “I have the feeling that my classroom is the messiest in the school, because they start playing, and whoever comes in thinks: my God! This classroom here doesn’t even have a teacher; but within that mess there is an organization of them [the children’s]” (DC, 2021).

Teacher Aline has the same understanding of the toy’s activity, but in a different way. In her speech she emphasizes the toy as an object which, autonomously, would be capable of making the child develop. She says:

(...) it is the toy that helps them learn, from the exchanges between classmates. So, I believe, and Andréia knows, I craft a lot of things, right? Because I am not a teacher here of things; it is the toy that promotes the learning, the exchange that makes the exchange between classmates, it does (...). They love this kind of thing, not just everything ready. Of course, it’s beautiful, it’s wonderful, but, anyway, thinking about this exchange in which they can touch, they can even ruin them to build and rebuild them again; so, by investing in your classroom, in the materials in your classroom, is winning half the battle (...). (Aline, FG, 2021)

As reported by Aline, her classroom is full of materials that allow students to interact with them, such as wooden and plastic artifacts and a series of games that she crafts. Andréia continues talking about this way of working and highlights the importance of letting children pick up and explore toys. She understands that many issues can be taught to children through toys, such as sharing, and mentions: “(...) the toy becomes this exchange, where you learn both cognitive issues, but also social, emotional issues, (...); it’s simply the child’s life, how they can learn; what it’s like at home; they often end up bringing us situations from home through playing and toys” (Andréia, FG, 2021).

Andréia’s statement takes us back to the ideas of Lazaretti (2017), who highlights that the content of games has a social, historical and cultural origin, since the reason that encourages children to take up an activity through playing is the reproduction of human relationships. The author warns that the content of these games represents a synthesis of attitudes, values and behaviors that mediate the child’s relationship with other people in certain social circumstances. Therefore, it is necessary that there are educational actions to promote the emergence, development and direction of the activity of playing and role-playing in children, enabling, through intervention, the content of this activity to “advance in the processes of child-world relations with humanizing possibilities” (Lazaretti, 2017, p. 134).

Lígia, when talking about the toy, remembers: “So, I think that the toy, it comes to say that the child is developing even if the record doesn’t appear yet, that will be the next stage, right, the cognitive side” (FG, 2021). We highlight how playful activity puts into operation a complexity of psychic functions, since, when playing, the child uses memory, attention, thought, imagination and language (Lazaretti, 2017).

In one of the FG moments, Lígia shared an experience from the previous year, 2020, in which she was concerned about the content and how she could work on [teach] African culture with her students. When planning this moment, Lígia decided to talk to the school’s pedagogical coordinator, who suggested playing “*minuê*”. About this experience, she reports:

They loved it. I thought: there it is; it's a game, right; I'm going to work on the content that I need to work on and I'm going to involve the children and develop it (...) so, how much of this, too, what we offer, right, the child goes and does it, because, sometimes, we stay there... will they like it, will it work out, right, but the child has the potential to do everything that is offered. (FG, 2021)

From this perspective, we highlight, in accordance with the ideas of Saviani (2019, p. 62), that from ECE it is necessary to be aware that "school concerns elaborated knowledge and not spontaneous knowledge; systematized knowledge and not fragmented knowledge; erudite culture and not popular culture". Teacher Lígia reports another example that includes this approach to content and mathematical reasoning, which can be developed and enhanced in ECE: "I also remember... one year I [used Tangram to teach] mathematical reasoning issues (...) to think about how this will be a game for children, right, so that they can access this content in a playful way" (FG, 2021).

These understandings about playing are fundamental, as they impact the teacher's actions in class. Despite expressing themselves in different ways, the ECE teachers involved in our study recognize the importance of playing in ECE, as expressed by Aline: "I think, therefore, that, if you have a goal, playing to be done all the time (...)" (FG, 2021). Lígia states: "(...) So, I see playing like this, in its most different aspects, that permeate all situations in ECE, from nursery to preschool II" (FG, 2021).

From these statements we realize that there is no clarity in the teachers' statements about the differences in the main activities of each phase of human development, when, for example, teacher Lígia refers to play from nursery to preschool II, which illustrates the importance of academic and continuing training for ECE teachers. It is true that a person can play at any stage of their life; however, role-playing, especially playing as a main activity, occurs and needs to be developed in the child in the preschool period, a moment that precedes the activity of study.

Another aspect that can be questioned is when Lígia explains: "So I bring it with me and I feel the most important thing is to play at this stage, right, when they explore and I let them create and they will learn that way too" (FG, 2021). In this statement there is no mention of the importance of the teacher in this process, which leads us to question: how does this teacher understand her action in this journey? Does the teacher mediate the game? Is it planned, is it systematic, is it intentional? Is she pedagogical?

Lazaretti (2017) warns that it is necessary to overcome the naturalizing perspective of human development, highlighting that the becoming, or the transposition of elementary functions to higher psychological functions in the child, does not result from a spontaneous process, but is produced by educational work. For the author, schooling is what promotes the formation of complex behaviors.

As proposed by the theory that underpins this study, pedagogical intentionality is fundamental for the development of a child's psyche. It is necessary to plan what is to be developed in the child based on all the proposed activities. This intentionality could be observed when Lígia reported a practical example about the use of role-playing games in the classroom, with themes that are fundamental for children's development, such as professions. The teacher's concern was focused on how to present to the children, in a playful way, the content to be worked on, in order to provide opportunities for this experience. In this context, this is how she expressed it:

(...) We had the pastry chef's day, right; because there, you work on a lot of content; you work on mathematics, you work on measurements, you work on the group

work itself, you know, the waiting... they are going to model the cookies, right. So, one day we did an activity in the courtyard —painter's day in Jundiá —; they were painting and I pasted brown paper on the walls, right? And they went to paint to the sound of music, right; so, I brought a little bit of music along with the activity itself, which had all that intentionality but was still a game. (FG, 2021)

Lígia deals with the teaching activity in ECE and how it can be enhanced based on the pedagogical intentionality of the activity of playing. These are games that involve social roles and human relations, in which the child experiments with and experiences human work activities. Lazaretti (2017, p. 135) states that the teacher's intervention in these situations can be "to increase materials, resources, knowledge about these work activities, sharing with children, playing together, instigating the plot, raising hypotheses for direction of actions and operations".

From this category, we highlight the pedagogical potential of ECE for the development of children in their different dimensions: cognitive, affective and psychic. As highlighted by authors of historical-cultural psychology, however, there must be an intentional and planned performance by the teacher in his teaching activity. It is not about waiting for the child to develop (Asbahr and Nascimento, 2013; Martins, 2015; Lazaretti, 2017; Magalhães, 2018), but intentionally intervening in this process, via pedagogical practice. It is in this line of thought that we present the second category.

PLAYING AND TEACHING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Based on the understanding of playing and the pedagogical potential of this activity in ECE, as expressed in the previous category, in this category we investigate how it happens in children with ASD (play activity) and analyze its implications for the organization and execution of activities by teachers (teaching activity) in the context of this investigation. Although our study considers the characteristics of the diagnosis, the focus is on the search for the human potential of the ASD child and the constitutive dimension of the environment, and, especially in this case, the school environment for development, as proposed by Vygostky (2012) when dealing with cultural compensation. This author argues that disability cannot be understood as a synonym for weakness or incapacity but needs to be understood by teachers also as an advantage, a source of strength.

In the following episode we contextualize some aspects of Adriano's school routine at *Escola Amor*.

Episode 1 with Adriano: "When I arrive in the room Adriano has movable letters and is setting up the alphabet on the floor; he verbalizes them in English, organizing them in alphabetical order. He stays for about 15 minutes, during which time the other children are playing around the room. Upon completing the alphabet, Adriano stands up and repeats the letters out loud, smiles and goes to his colleagues who are involved in the target shooting game. He takes a dart and goes in front of the panel. A classmate approaches and asks him to leave. The monitor intervenes, and they play together for a few moments. Five children are present in the classroom at the time of free play. Adriano notices my presence, takes a doll's crown and puts it on my head, looks quickly and continues walking around the room. It is a time of school adaptation. Adriano often leaves the room and walks along the corridor that leads to the director's office. While Adriano is walking, another teacher finds him and speaks to him. Monitor Andréia looks at me and says: 'he's going for a walk'. Then she goes to him and invites him back to the classroom. Next, Adriano becomes interested in some fruit domino-like blocks, in which he searches for and selects the same pieces. Some classmates also take the game pieces and he doesn't mind. The monitor talks to him based on the names of the fruits in English and he repeats them. After finishing this process of separating the pieces, Adriano gets involved with the building blocks, starts with one piece and organizes the others in a row, in a logical sequence until number six" (DP, 2021).

As described in the episode, monitor Andréia, when talking about Adriano, highlights that his passion is the alphabet. She says that he likes letters and also has a bond with her through English, since she also works as an English teacher. In many moments, the interaction between them takes place through this language, as observed in class. When talking about the student, Andréia explains: “Particularly our Adriano (...) plays with some other things, (...) but his passion is the alphabet, so everything that has letters or numbers he plays with (...)” (FG, 2021). It is clear that his interest in letters favors the inclusion process, since he is recognized for his cognitive potential, which also ends up being valued at school. We stress, however, the importance of him entering into the activity of playing during this preschool period, so that his HPFs can develop.

From this perspective, when discussing Adriano’s socialization, Andréia reports that she realizes that he does not have the initiative to seek out his classmates to play, but that “he doesn’t mind that, sometimes, a classmate comes to help; so, sometimes, he gets interested in his classmates games and ends up participating a little too, you know”. And she reaffirms: “I see it as a toy, as this tool of exchange, you know, of learning and exchange, and for them to show us how they are and what they want through the toy” (FG, 2021).

When observing the naturalness with which the teacher and classmates interact with Adriano, it becomes clear how much his individuality is recognized and accepted in this context. His behavior, with restricted interests (in his case letters and numbers), his stereotypies (hand flapping), are not seen as problems, but as a part of his individuality.

We warn, however, that in order for the development of the psyche to occur, this playing activity must have intentionality and be guided by the teacher. As pointed out by Leontiev (2004; 2016), the child must enter into the activity of playing through their action with objects.

When observing Leandro and teacher Lígia’s classroom routine, her active role as an intermediary of play and pedagogical work with her class became evident in several moments, as in the episode reported below.

Episode 1 with Leandro:

When I arrive at school, the teacher has the class lined up for a walk around the neighborhood. The students are excited and walk around the city blocks. Everyone wants to speak and the teacher organizes it so that everyone has a turn and a voice. During the tour, questions are asked, and, at these moments, the teacher encourages the students to observe what is around them. In front of a cassava plantation, she questions them about their diet and talks about the plants. In the classroom, issues related to the tour still remain on the class agenda, and, from there, the class is led to activities of imagination, music and games, in which they can exercise their activity on the objects present in the classroom. In one of these moments, Leandro, one of the students in the class, tells a story about a dog; the teacher gives him space and a voice, and encourages his classmates to listen to him until he finishes his story. In this story, some elements that are part of his creation become clear. (CD, 2021)

Vygotsky (2018), when dealing with creation, the act of creating, states that this is only possible thanks to reality, and that it is from reality that the elements of human creation are constituted. For the author, every time man imagines, modifies, creates something new, combines, this is creation happening, even if it seems small compared to great inventions. Thus, it is in childhood that, from playing, creation begins to emerge in the child, since imitation, in this process, plays a fundamental role in the child’s development, filling a place in this activity. When playing, however, children hardly reproduce exactly what happens in reality, but make a creative re-elaboration of the impressions experienced by them, in which they create a new reality based on their aspirations and desires. Such aspects can also be observed in the way children play in the classroom, as shown in Episode 1 with Leandro:

That same day, while I am following the classroom routine, the teacher proposes a time when the children can play freely. Leandro sets up a ramp (with EVAs), a wooden stool and a police truck, and follows a journey with this truck. While he organizes this game, some classmates set up a cabin in a corner of the room with a multitude of toys, such as teddy bears, superheroes, dolls and cars. Leandro, when observing his classmates, also gets involved in this game for a while. The students play in a friendly way and the teacher and monitor remain attentive to the children's needs. After this period, the teacher invites everyone to put away their toys, as it is close to snack time. (CD, 2021)

We therefore see that, in both classrooms, the teachers organize the environment in such a way as to favor creation, imagination and exchanges based on play. As it is a preschool, there are student letters and assignments on display, and there are also specific spaces for playing. In this sense, we highlight the importance of the environment to enhance these processes in children with ASD, since, as Vygostky (2018) teaches us, the richer a person's experiences, the more material is available for their imagination. The teaching role is fundamental so that this play enables the child's development, as in the following two episodes:

Episode 2 with Adriano: "There are six students in the room on this day. When I arrive in the classroom, the children are all sitting on the floor in a circle. The monitor is carrying out an educational activity called 'Good morning'. Next, she tells the story of the book *My Heart is a Zoo*, written by Michael Hall. During the story, Adriano sits with his colleagues and, most of the time, draws letters in the air. Andréia asks questions about the story and the other children in the class respond excitedly. In an attempt to involve Adriano, she counts the numerals in Portuguese and in English, encourages the whole class to speak and they participate. She says: 'How many hippos are there? Do you remember the story of the hippopotamus that climbed into the spider's web?' And the children talk (stimulating memory, creativity, imagination, colors, shapes). 'Does the bear also live in the zoo?' 'No' (children). 'So, what is he doing here?' 'He came to eat' (children). At a certain point, the monitor asks the children: 'Where is the heart?' And they all show quickly. Adriano remains as he is and, at that moment, as a researcher, I intervene and ask: 'Adriano, where is your heart?' Adriano immediately puts his hand on his chest and shows where his heart is (the teacher looks at me surprised by the child's immediate response). On this same day, the children continue playing with the animals and toys in the classroom. In a very natural way they interact with me, telling me facts about their daily lives. Adriano continues listening, but remains silent, showing no initiative to share facts about his life" (CD, 2021).

In the FG Andréia takes up the scene from the book to discuss Adriano's advances following his inclusion in the school and shows how emotional she was when she saw him place his hand on his heart, responding to this researcher. In her words: "At that moment, you know, I got emotional, like, about him; he sits in the circle today, participates, you know. And I could see several colleagues and I saw that he was singing and following the music at the exact same time as the other classmates" (FG, 2021).

This statement expresses this school monitor's perspective on Adriano's possibilities and also on the development of his HPF, in which the issue of imitation, attention, memory and language is put into action through a pedagogical activity. The book used is a pedagogical instrument that enhances learning, which, if well explored, allows children to expand their world views and relate scientific content, based on their cultural aspects. Such aspects of development are also evident in Leandro's participation in the classroom.

Episode 2 with Leandro: "When I enter the classroom, the children are sitting on their chairs/ desks waiting for breakfast. Leandro has his seat next to the teacher. She looks at me and says

that at that moment he needs to be a little close to the teacher; then (guided by her) he gets up and returns to his place in the class. A child asks me: 'Are you going to take care of us today?' Afterwards, the teacher organizes the class for coffee. Leandro sits at the snack table like the rest of his classmates and waits — he doesn't want to eat bread. Upon returning, the teacher reminds the students of activities involving the spider 'Dona Aranha' and says that, in that class, they will work on the letter A. Everyone gets involved in the activity. The room is organized into two rows of classes (two groups). On the printed A4 sheet there is an activity to complete the spider (draw the other half), and the teacher suggests that they complete the letter A with modeling clay. Everyone gets involved in the activity and Leandro does his own too. He wants a specific color (red) and the teacher negotiates with him. At this moment, a boy takes the clay, puts it on the pencil and says: 'Who wants a popsicle'. Leandro immediately responds: 'That's a pencil'. After completing the activity, the teacher lets the students play with modeling clay. Leandro immediately begins to make stereotypical movements and reproduce echolalia (characteristics of some children with ASD). The teacher, upon noticing him in that movement, intervenes, calling him by name and says: 'Leandro, I'm going to give you some shapes'. She searches a cupboard and provides the class with molds for clay, rolls and plastic knives and the students get involved in the game.

As a researcher, I approach them and start playing with the children. I talk to Leandro and start to encourage him to make sense of his game, until, after my insistence, he says: 'I'm making super delicious fish'. I ask him about what we will need to roast the fish. He promptly takes the plate and pretends to put it in the oven (without there being an oven). I look at him and say: 'Isn't it too hot?', and he replies: 'No, it is born hot and delicious'. Next, I encourage the teacher to join in the game, saying to her: 'Look what delicious fish Leandro made', and he says to the teacher: 'Look at the cookie I made'. The teacher asks him to taste the cookie and he gives it to her; he puts spice on the fish and says: 'Two drumsticks, a cookie and a corn'. During the game, he warns: 'That's not real', but continues playing. At this time, he also agrees to lend some forms to his friends. After this moment, the teacher asks the children to put away the play dough and helps them, beginning to prepare the class for lunch. She invites everyone to lie down on the classroom floor and tells a story about the seed that the children love. Leandro makes the gestures and imitates together with the class" (CD, 2021).

Vygotsky (2012) highlights that, when the direct path of development is made impossible by disability, it is necessary to seek the indirect path, so that, for the author, the distinction between the two planes of behavioral development, the natural and the cultural, is fundamental to a new theory of education. Thus, for him, the development of HPFs in children happens out of necessity. If the child never has the need to think, he/she will not do it, so that adults must produce this need.

Along the same lines, Leontiev (2004) criticizes theories that associate capabilities/aptitudes only with biological issues, and considers that, beyond brain structures, the abilities and functions corresponding to specifically human acquisition cannot be fixed morphologically. The author argues that the biologically inherited properties of man constitute only one condition for the formation of HPF (neoformations), and that the other condition "is the world of objects and phenomena that surround man, created by the work and struggle of countless human generations. It is this world that provides man with what is truly human" (Leontiev, 2004, p. 257). Thus, when studying man's higher psychic processes, it is possible to distinguish, on the one hand, their form, that is, the function they perform and, on the other, their structure. Leontiev (2004) considers that the first element is biologically determined and the second is socially determined. In this sense, the subject appropriates the world and objects based on their social relationships, and, upon entering into activity, develops him/herself.

Thus, by proposing role-playing activities in ECE, it is possible for all children (with and without ASD) to exercise their cognitive, affective and social skills. Lazaretti (2017) states that the transition from manipulative object activity to role-playing activity happens at the moment when knowing, manipulating and appropriating operations and procedures with objects becomes no longer enough for the child, so that he/she wants to appropriate the world, the human relationships and, therefore, his/her interest lies in the social meaning of actions with objects. The child wants to do what the adults do within their social relationships. In this way, social role-playing, as a playful activity, begins with isolated action with a certain object and, later, the child extends this action, in different ways, to activities linked to each other, which reflect real everyday life practices (Lazaretti, 2017).

For Adriano, these difficulties related to playing are more evident, as his school monitor reports: “Adriano (...), I noticed, I think, his main characteristic is this; is to focus on his play; I think their main characteristic is to focus on what they are doing (...)” (Andréia, FG, 2021). However, she also highlights the importance of classmates and school inclusion in this process:

And it will do a lot; that way he gets into the routine (...) Today he’s already in line with the others, right; it looks cute; he notices the game and starts singing a little song, making gestures with his hands and ends up following along... so, I think their main issue is this interaction; he concentrates on his game, and he plays alone. (...) I see that this is the main focus of the game; it is this concentration and doing what they are doing, and the others are talking, and they are there immersed in their game, but they play. (Andreia, FG, 2021)

Based on historical-cultural psychology and historical-critical pedagogy, we understand that it is necessary to analyze the process of development of the child’s activity and how this activity is constituted in the concrete conditions of their life, which will make it possible to elucidate both the role of the external conditions of their life and their potential (Leontiev, 2004; 2016). From this analysis it will also be possible to understand the leading role of education and creation for their development, operating in their activity and in their reality, determining their psyche and consciousness (Leontiev, 2016).

The student must feel included and, at the same time, motivated to get involved in the activities proposed by the teacher. Lígia says:

And Leandro, I see that he had a lot of progress (voice intonation, emphasis) in this matter of playing, right, because then he was very focused only on his little table, but that toy that he came to, he picked up, you know, which was kind of systematic (...), but today he enters the symbolic game, you know, today he enters the game circuit, he joins his classmates’ games; so, he had a lot of development in this matter of playing and I even have records of the past, and then we were working with little pieces, right. And he said: “Look, I set up a city...’ you know, things that, because I’ve been with him for the second year, you know, there are things that he wouldn’t have done earlier, you know, he would just set up little pieces, he would just pile them up, piling them up, piling them up. So, he had this thing, “look, I built a city”, you know; so, it’s from things like this that I realize that he has evolved a lot in this issue of playing and entering into this symbolic game of play. (FG, 2021).

At this moment, Andréia also shared about Adriano: “(...) last week, he prepared some food for me and came to give it to me (laughs). So, (...) he was there playing and he went around the room, getting interested in things and then he made the food, gave it to me and was like: ‘mamamama’ (...)” (FG, 2021).

These aspects described by the teachers remind us of the importance that the school plays in the development of the HPF of students with ASD. As evidenced in the research by Salles (2018) and Araujo (2019), the adult, through pedagogical intermediation and the bond with the ASD child, allows their development to occur in a more qualified way. When analyzing these children's games, Silva (2017, p. 107) emphasizes the importance of "the mediator (adult) being attentive (sensitive) to the visual production, that is, to the scenario at the moment of playful experiences. And this is not a detail for the child with autism, it is a necessity". Thus, it is only through this attentive and intentional look at these children's play that it will be possible for them to act beyond their usual possibilities.

Children with ASD need to be taught how to play, as shown by research carried out by Albuquerque and Benitez (2020). These authors state that such behaviors need to be developed in children with ASD in an environment that favors the necessary conditions for playing. They highlight the importance of studies in the area in order to provide professionals and families with the necessary resources to assist in teaching this behavior to ASD children, considering the importance of adult and environmental mediation for the acquisition of appropriate behaviors related to play (Albuquerque and Benitez, 2020).

This understanding is not something given to teachers, as becomes clear when Andréia talks about her student: "(...) But I think, about this interest, this development of Adriano's; for me he is self-taught; then it will be like that series *The Good Doctor*, you know, he will have a splendid future because he learns quickly (...)" (FG, 2021). Andréia continues verbalizing what she understands about the adult's role in this situation, and declares: "Our issue is this, you know, to bring, to contextualize; I'm going to use that word, right, to contextualize everything he knows, everything that he learns, and bring it all to this moment, so how are we going to start working on this" (GF, 2021).

From this perspective, many children with ASD have skills in some areas of knowledge; however, it is necessary to "contextualize", as the teacher reminds us. With this word we want to highlight the strength of the historical-social context for human development. As expressed and defended in this paper, the development of HPFs only occurs in the relationship with others. It is when ASD children enter into activity, in the preschool period, that they will be able, through role-playing, to appropriate human culture.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed to investigate the understandings produced by teachers who work in ECE with regard to the activity of playing, analyzing its implications for the organization and execution of the activity of teaching children with ASD enrolled in preschool. Based on the results and ideas of historical-cultural psychology, we highlight the potential that playing has in ECE, especially in the preschool period.

The analyzed context made it possible to understand, in a more specific way, how playing is understood by teachers, as expressed in category 1, "understandings about playing". In this category, we found that there is still a concern with recording and how to demonstrate the child's development. In the interviews, however, the potential that the practice of games and role-playing presents for and in the growth of children as well as that of scientific content were evident, contributing to the constitution of the child's HPFs.

In the category 2, "playing and teaching in ECE for children with ASD", through observations and the focus group, it was possible to analyze the benefits of including these children in ECE and how much the environment contributes to the development of their psyche. When they are involved in classroom activities, they exercise, through imitation, the psychic functions, such as

attention, memory, planning (waiting their turn), language, creativity and issues related to the symbolic. Supported by authors from a historical-cultural perspective, we highlight the role of the adult as an intermediary in this context in adult-child and child-child relationships. Based on stimuli from the environment and the child's activity, learning and, consequently, development are made possible.

In general, we emphasize the importance of exploring the main activity at each stage of the child, in order to promote the development of their psyche, as proposed by Vygotsky in his HPFs or neoformations in Leontiev. We also highlight the strength of the environment so that this process is effective; hence the importance of inclusive education for the development of ASD children. From coexistence with other children and the opportunities offered with planned, structured and intentional teaching, another path of development is made possible: a cultural one.

As evidenced in the teachers' statements, this understanding is not given automatically. Teachers often question themselves and find themselves questioned about their pedagogical practice. We believe that the path to change, in this sense, will be through initial and continued training.

We stress that the education network in which data production took place already had a path in the area of inclusive education with a support network for the teacher, the specialized educational service (SES) teacher, the school psychology service and the network of health (professionals from the Intellectual Rehabilitation Center — IRC II). Therefore, our data correspond to a small sample of the theme and of reality in terms of the inclusion of ASD children in Brazil and worldwide.

Finally, we highlight the importance of the theoretical foundations of historical-cultural psychology for understanding activity theory, the development of children's psyche and the immense pedagogical potential of ECE in this process. There are skills that, when developed during the preschool period through playing and teaching activities, will make all a difference in the lives of these people and their families. Hence the importance of looking at and investing in research and training in this area.

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