

## **Teachers' Role in Play with Infants and Young Children**

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**ABSTRACT – Teachers' Role in Play with Infants and Young Children.** This study investigated the role of teachers in play with babies and young children at a Belo Horizonte Municipal Early Childhood Education School (EMEI-Tupi), based on study cycles with the school staff, anchored on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of Historical-Cultural Psychology and Ethnography in Education. It is part of an umbrella research project, Childhood and Schooling. The results highlight how the role of teachers in play is marked by complexities and tensions, intentionality and flexible planning, provision of materials, broadening experiences, and active participation in the play, seen here as a language of this activity that guides development.

**Keywords:** Play. Teaching. Early Childhood Education. Cultural-Historical Psychology. Ethnography in Education.

**RESUMO – Papel das Docentes nas Brincadeiras com Bebês e Crianças Pequenas.** Esse trabalho investigou o que contou como papel das docentes nas brincadeiras com bebês e crianças pequenas em uma Escola Municipal de Educação Infantil de Belo Horizonte (EMEI-Tupi) a partir de Ciclos de Estudos com a equipe escolar com base nos pressupostos teórico-metodológicos da Psicologia Histórico-cultural e da Etnografia em Educação. Ele está inscrito em uma pesquisa guarda-chuva, Infância e Escolarização. Os resultados colocam em evidência como o papel das professoras nas brincadeiras é marcado por complexidades e tensões, intencionalidade e planejamento flexível, fornecimento dos materiais, ampliação de vivências e participação ativa nessas brincadeiras, vistas aqui como uma linguagem dessa atividade guia do desenvolvimento.

**Palavras-chave:** Brincadeira. Docência. Educação Infantil. Psicologia Histórico-Cultural. Etnografia em Educação.

## Introduction

Considering that play is one of the structuring axes of Early Childhood Education (Brasil, 2009), recognized as a right to children's learning and development (Brasil, 2018), which promotes "children's immersion in diverse languages and the progressive mastery of multiple forms of expression: gestural, verbal, artistic, dramatic, and musical" (Brasil, 2009, p. 25) and, also, the guiding activity of child development (Vigotski, 2008), several studies have been dedicated to understanding how play is constituted in daycare centers and preschools. In this sense, the objective of this article is to investigate the role of teachers in play with infants and young children at a Municipal Early Childhood Education School in Belo Horizonte – EMEI Tupi<sup>1</sup>.

The activity discussed in this article is part of the Childhood and Schooling Research Program, approved under CAAE No. 62621316.9.0000.5149, of the Federal University of Minas Gerais. This program followed a class of infants at EMEI Tupi from 2017, when they first had contact with the institution at seven months of age, until 2019. This longitudinal, ethnographic study aims to investigate how children's cultural development occurs in a collective context of education and care. The intention was to follow them until they entered elementary school at age 6. However, the health conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to change our plans for continuing the field research, which had been conducted in person.

Thus, we were compelled to explore alternative research instruments that incorporated the principles of Historical-Cultural Psychology and Ethnography in Education, utilizing videoconferencing platforms. This was only possible due to the trust and sharing of empirical material we had been developing for three years at EMEI Tupi. Continuing the field research virtually was a challenge for everyone involved, as we had to navigate digital platforms with which many of us were unfamiliar.

Therefore, one way to maintain research ties with EMEI Tupi during the pandemic was to conduct Study Cycles with the institution's staff, which chose the theme of play. The study meetings took place from August to September 2020, totaling 11 meetings with an average participation of 36 people per meeting (including teachers, coordinators, directors, and researchers) and an average duration of 1 hour and 30 minutes.

The dynamics of the Study Cycles followed a cultural pattern that we explain here: we began by welcoming the teachers with informal conversations on a wide range of topics. As the researcher-teacher relationship developed, some teachers utilized this space to solicit opinions on pedagogical activities. It also became a space for welcoming and venting about the difficulties faced during the pandemic. After this moment, a literary reading was always held, and a space was opened to share impressions about this reading. Then, we moved on to a collective discussion on the topic of play, which involved different dynamics, such as listening to the teachers' perspectives, watching videos from the

research database of events in which the children played, commenting on them, and discussing the organization of the work with play at EMEI Tupi.

At each meeting, guiding questions were proposed, inspired by the material produced by Bondioli and Ferrari (2008) for preschool assessments. They encompassed aspects of materials, environmental organization, playtime, and the role of adults. Regarding this last topic, the subject of our discussion in this article, the questions formulated were: Is pretend play left solely to the children? What role does the teacher play? Observer? Participant? Does the teacher organize the environment with play in mind? Does the teacher ensure the integration of the various symbolic proposals, promoting both the quality of fantasy (“as if”) and specific aspects (the relationship between drawing, storytelling, pretend play, and dramatization)? Based on the teachers’ statements throughout these 11 formative meetings, we sought to investigate, in a contrastive, historical, and holistic manner, what this group considered to be the role of teachers in play.

Therefore, this article will present the conception of official Brazilian documents regarding the role of teachers in play; the conception of play as a guiding activity for the development of infants and young children in light of Historical-Cultural Psychology; the use of Ethnography in Education; and the analysis of teachers’ discourses regarding their role in play at EMEI-Tupi.

### **Play: Tension between Intervention and Freedom**

As Altun (2018) points out, although the importance of play for children’s development is generally agreed upon, there is still controversy regarding the degree of teachers’ involvement in play. Indeed, studies examining teachers’ perspectives (Davies, 1997; Altun, 2018; Aboud, 2018; Hunter et al., 2020) reveal that a tension between intervention and freedom characterizes this discussion. On the one hand, it is understood that the teacher is responsible for stimulating children’s development and that their participation in play can enrich this activity. On the other hand, play is viewed as an activity that children should lead, and this participation by teachers can be seen as impeding free play. Given this tension, it is possible to observe that the roles teachers assume in play are not fixed, but are in constant movement and transformation. Jung (2013) demonstrated how the roles three teachers assumed in a class of infants in the United States evolved as they developed relationships with the children, and how these relationships also changed in response to the teachers’ assumed roles, highlighting the movement and dynamism of the Early Childhood Education institution. In this scenario of multiple roles, Ashiabi (2007) argues that the decision of which role to assume is up to the teacher, based on careful observation of the children and the classroom context:

Sociodramatic play in the early childhood classroom requires a range of teacher participation, and teachers have to decide the right degree of involvement. Teachers have to observe what children are doing, support their efforts, and get involved

thoughtfully to support additional learning. (Ashiabi, 2007, p. 205).

The link between play and learning, with the use of play for didactic purposes, is another observed tension. As Steinle points out,

[...] in many cases, early childhood schools are still trapped in a methodological dualism in which play is sometimes free, and sometimes pedagogical, with the sole purpose of teaching academic content imposed by the curriculum (Steinle, 2013, p. 124).

Faria and Hai (2020), based on an analysis of Fleer's (2010) work, argue that the role of the Early Childhood Education teacher is to work with imagination and cognition as a unit, relying on imaginary situations to teach scientific concepts to children. However, Soares, Côco, and Venterim (2016) conducted a bibliographic survey that reveals studies questioning the use of play merely as a pretext for learning content, i.e., as a secondary activity rather than as a central axis of work with an end in itself. In this scenario, the very use of play for didactic purposes can generate the conception that free play is a time of mere recreation and rest. Therefore, the teacher's participation is unnecessary or hindering (Sommerhalder, Nicolielo, & Alves, 2016).

Given this context, what do official Early Childhood Education documents in Brazil say about the role of teachers in play? Resolution No. 5 of December 17, 2009, which establishes the National Curricular Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI), amid a period of intense revision of concepts regarding the education of children in collective spaces, establishes that pedagogical practices in Early Childhood Education must be guided by interactions and play. Play also appears as a child's right, which must be guaranteed by the pedagogical approach of Early Childhood Education institutions, and as a way to use multiple languages (Brasil, 2009). However, this document provides no further information on the topic of play, nor on the organization of time, materials, and space for this purpose, nor on the role of the teacher in play activities.

Therefore, the Ministry of Education (MEC) committed to developing guidelines for implementing these curricular guidelines, expanding their themes, and including play in Early Childhood Education (Brasil, 2009). Thus, two years later, the material *Daycare Toys and Plays: Pedagogical Guidance Manual*<sup>2</sup> was published, aiming to "guide the selection, organization, and use of toys and plays in daycare centers" (Brasil, 2012, p. 10). This material promotes the discourse that children are not born knowing how to play, but rather learn to play through social relationships. In this sense, the publication states that the teacher must organize, prepare, plan, execute, propose, and mediate play, in addition to creating a routine with the children so that they learn how to use, store, and care for the toys available. The manual, by defining itself as addressing only "high-quality play," as opposed to a "spontaneist stance," establishes that the quality of play is not separate from the quality of Early Childhood Education. Furthermore, it asserts that high-quality play is a result of adult intentionality, attributing the "poverty of themes or the absence of more complex scripts during play" to the

teacher's lack of participation in play or the poor structuring of the environment due to the absence of adequate materials (Brasil, 2012, p. 59). Furthermore, the manual establishes a way of being for the teacher as an essential condition for the development of the axis of play in Early Childhood Education: the professional must be "reveller and playful." According to the manual, "this attitude on the part of the teacher is essential for creating bonds with the child and for organizing situations in the curriculum that include interactions and play" (Brasil, 2012, p. 54). These concepts, present in this material, led us to the following questions: Is it possible to establish a hierarchy among play activities, classifying them as high or low quality? Under what criteria? Given the assertion that the adult's intentionality is responsible for the quality of play, what would their role, in fact, be in ensuring that quality?

Reading the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) (Brasil, 2018), we observed a continuity of what had been discussed in the previously cited documents, with the reiteration of play and interactions as structuring axes of pedagogical practices at this stage of education. According to the BNCC, it is through these experiences (playing and interacting) that "children can construct and acquire knowledge through their actions and interactions with their peers and adults, which enables learning, development, and socialization" (Brasil, 2018, p. 39). Play is seen as a right to learning and development in Early Childhood Education. Once again, there is a discussion about the educational intentionality of adults, as opposed to a natural or spontaneous development process. According to the document,

Part of the educator's job is to reflect, select, organize, plan, mediate, and monitor all practices and interactions, ensuring a variety of situations that promote children's complete development. Furthermore, it is necessary to monitor both these practices and the children's learning, observing the trajectory of each child and the entire group—their achievements, progress, possibilities, and learning experiences (Brasil, 2018, p. 39).

In this context, the perspective adopted in official documents contrasts with a spontaneous view of the educational process in Early Childhood Education, where children are born knowing how to play, and the teacher does not need to intervene. These documents acknowledge that the teacher plays a pivotal role in the play process, encompassing planning, organizing, proposing, mediating, intervening, and monitoring play, with their educational intentionality being fundamental to the so-called *quality of play*. However, it is also observed that these documents focus on learning and place play as a means to achieve it. Therefore, they do not see play as a guiding activity for the cultural development of infants and young children, a topic we will focus in the next section.

### **Play as a Developmental Activity-Guide**

Play is understood here as a historically, discursively, and culturally constructed human activity that presupposes the creation of an imaginary situation, bringing with it possibilities that will guide the development of infants and young children (Vigotski, 2008). Therefore, we agree with Silva (2021) that it is inconsistent to invoke Vygotsky to

defend the *use* of play for the acquisition of individual skills, teaching content, or improving performance, always focusing on learning, as seen in documents, guidelines, and curricula. According to this author,

Considering play as an activity, in this [historical-cultural] approach, has implications, one of which is to address play in its own terms and not as a contribution, extension, or equivalence to school learning or schoolwork. If the focus is on teaching rather than play, this creates an incongruence with the construction of the activity and the person within the creative cycle that constitutes the design of the Historical-Cultural approach (Silva, 2021, p. 103).

Saying that play is the guiding activity for the development of infants and young children does not refer to its quantitative aspects. Furthermore, play is not solely responsible for infant development; rather, it is the primary activity that has the potential to provoke psychological changes and drive cultural development. As Prestes (2012) argues,

By adopting the term “guiding activity,” it is considered that it more accurately helps us understand that a guiding activity is not the activity that occupies the child’s time most, but rather the activity that carries valuable factors containing structural elements that drive development, that is, guides children’s psychological development (Prestes, 2012, p. 184).

In this sense, Vygotsky (2008) points out that we need to understand the valuable factors that drive development, i.e., what play promotes in the cultural development of children and infants, and what can be developed with the help of imaginary situations. One of the infants’ first plays is hide-and-seek. They delight when adults pretend not to see them and then surprise them with a tight hug. It may not seem like it, but this play represents an advancement in babies’ cultural development, sharpening higher psychological functions of cultural origin, such as the perception of what is hidden and revealed. Infants’ imitation of clapping, humming, and gesturing with their little fingers to the song “Meu pintinho amarelinho,” or smiling and clapping when we sing “Happy Birthday to You,” for example, are indications of how play can guide the development of emotion and perception at this stage in their lives. According to the Gomes and Pereira (2022), when infants point to the filter or the water bottle, ask for water, and say “api” or “ava,” a revolution occurs in their cultural development when they use gestures as signs and the signs “api” or “ava.”

When a child turns a broomstick into a horse, plays circle games, or acts out a mother-daughter scenario, as we saw in the EMEI-Tupi nursery, they are acting differently and independently of what they see. Their action is not linked to their direct perception, but rather to their thoughts and their imaginary field. Thus, the child distinguishes the meaning of the object from its materiality—for example, the concept of a horse from the real horse—and does the same with the circle game, which was initially under the teacher’s control and later passed to Sofia and Maria, two two-year-old girls from EMEI-Tupi. In this game, they assume roles they cannot yet play in real life, such as mother and daughter, which

constitutes a complex action and, at the same time, favors the transformation of their psychological structures. As Vygotsky states, “the creation of an imaginary situation is not a fortuitous fact in a child’s life; its first consequence is the child’s emancipation from situational constraints” (2008, p. 32). In play, children, through creativity and imagination, can do things that are beyond their reach in reality, taking on different roles, such as doctor, teacher, horsewoman, mother, or farm animal. In short, countless possibilities emerge according to each child’s unique experiences. Furthermore, they can play with each other before the age of three, contradicting the statements made by Vygotsky, Wallon, and Piaget in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (GOMES and PEREIRA, 2022). These children, together with their teachers, set affection, imagination, and creativity in motion, boosting their development:

Thus, play creates the zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child is trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour (Vigotski, 2008, p. 35).

However, this apparent freedom to be whatever one wants in play is, according to Vygotsky (2008), an illusory freedom, because it is subject to rules, which constitutes a paradox. On the one hand, children achieve what they most desire in play, becoming what is beyond their reach in real life; on the other hand, their actions are subject to rules they have established for themselves. Thus, play involves both pleasure and displeasure, as well as a range of emotions that influence their cultural development.

Vygotsky argues that play cannot be understood as a merely cognitive process, leaving aside the affective realm. Instead, it is affect that constitutes it: “Play is essentially wish fulfilment—not, however, isolated wishes, but generalized affects” (Vigotski, 2008, p. 26).

It is for all these reasons that play carries with it the potential for the development of infants and young children, enabling the transformation of elementary psychic functions into higher, culturally based psychic functions. As Vygotsky concludes:

(...) play provides changes in needs and in consciousness of a much wider nature. Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development. Action in the imaginative field, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives—all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development. The child moves forward essentially through play activity. It is in this way that play can be termed a leading activity that determines the child’s development (Vigotski, 2008, p. 35).

From this perspective, we can ask ourselves: How are these developmental possibilities created by play in Early Childhood Education institutions constituted? Furthermore, what role do teachers play in this

process? To this end, we also need to adopt an ethnographic perspective, whose theoretical and methodological assumptions we will explain below.

## Ethnography in Education

Our research group adopts the perspective of the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group at the University of California, Santa Barbara, which understands classrooms [in our study, the nursery and activity rooms] as cultures that can be studied from an emic cultural perspective. Culture is understood as

a set of practices and principles of practice that are constructed by members as they establish roles and relationships, norms and expectations, and rights and obligations that constitute membership in the local group (Green, Dixon & Zaharlick, 2005, p. 30).

Thus, understanding culture as a collective construction implies that it is not a closed system of concepts that people must acquire, but rather a system open to modifications, revisions, and resistance, as there is interaction between members of this culture over time and through various events. These interactions constitute situated meanings that do not simply reside in the mind of each individual, but undergo constant negotiations (Green; Gee, 1998) and are essentially semiotic (Geertz, 2008). The task of ethnography is to seek an understanding of these meanings from an emic perspective, i.e., from the perspective of the members of the activity room and nursery, that is, from the culture being studied. Thus, it is possible to make visible daily practices that are usually invisible, making the familiar strange and familiar with the strange, to understand “what members need to know, produce, understand, and predict in order to participate as a member of the group” (Green; Dixon; Zaharlick, 2005, p. 28).

In this sense, our objective is not to define the role of teachers in play in Early Childhood Education, because, if that were the case, we would not need to conduct an ethnographic study and go into the field. Instead, we aim to understand *what counts as the role of teachers in play in Early Childhood Education for the group of teachers at EMEI Tupi*, situated within its historical and cultural context. To this end, we adopted a holistic, interpretive, iterative-responsive, and contrastive approach (Green; Dixon; Zaharlick, 2005).

Adopting this perspective involves asking ethnographic questions (such as: “What is happening here?” and “Why is this the way it is and not different?”), seeking to understand “who has access to each “bit of life,” when, where, under what conditions, with whom, using what artifacts, and with what outcomes” (Green; Dixon; Zaharlick, 2005, p. 49; Erickson, 2004).

Based on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of Ethnography in Education and Historical-Cultural Psychology, we sought to analyze the discourses (and the contexts for their production) of teachers at EMEI Tupi to understand what, for this group, constitutes the teacher's role in play. Language plays a fundamental role in this process,

because, as Fiorin (2012) points out, “there is no direct access to reality, since it is always mediated by language. The real always presents itself to us semiotically” (p. 19), agreeing with Vygotsky’s view when he argues in favor of what is specifically human: the ability to, through semiotic mediation, understand, feel, live, and create cultures. Thus, we realize that discourse analysis goes beyond describing a conversation and reading the transcript (Green; Gee, 1998). It is necessary to investigate the relationships between part and whole, conducting contrastive and recursive analyses to understand the situated meanings constructed by that group, based on the Bakhtinian conception that every utterance is a response to other utterances and that “words are always filled with content and meaning drawn from behavior or ideology” (Bakhtin; Volochinov, 2006, p. 96).

Ethnography in a virtual environment enabled the investigation to continue in a context of social isolation, transforming face-to-face meetings into interactions mediated by videoconferencing platforms. Hine (2000) and Kozinets (2010) recognize cyberspace as a legitimate field of research, where cultures and communities form and interact. The transition to the online environment does not detract from the essence of ethnography in education, which seeks to understand the situated meanings and cultural practices of a group from an emic perspective (Green, Dixon & Zaharlick, 2005). Thus, participant observation and discourse analysis are transposed to the digital environment, enabling data collection through virtual interactions, such as the discussions and exchanges that occur in Study Cycles. The relevance of this approach was accentuated by the pandemic, which prompted researchers to explore and validate the online environment as a fertile space for ethnographic research, ensuring the continuity of knowledge production in challenging scenarios (Costa, 2024).

### **What Counted as the Teacher’s Role in Play at EMEI-Tupi**

In the Study Cycles proposed by the teachers at EMEI-Tupi who chose *play* as their theme, video recordings were made, transcriptions into message units (which are the smallest units of spoken, written, or gestured messages with meaning) emitted by the research participants (Gomes, Dias, and Vargas, 2017, p. 127), and individual and collective field notes from the meetings were taken. Based on the analysis of the empirical material thus constructed, we sought to answer the question: What counted as the teacher’s role in play at EMEI-Tupi? In this way, we aim to understand the meanings and significance that the teachers attribute to their experiences with play at this institution.

#### *Having intentionality and planning, but being open and flexible to change*

Fiorin (2012, p. 19) emphasizes that “every word dialogues with other words, is constituted by other words, is surrounded by other words.” From this dialogical perspective, all discourses are inevitably

permeated by the discourses of others. A statement is always a refutation, confirmation, complement, or assumption (i.e., a position taken) on another statement. Thus, the teachers at EMEI Tupi emphasize in their discourses that presenting intentionality is fundamental to teaching, demonstrating agreement with the position of official documents (Brasil, 2012 and 2018). This intentionality will guide the planning and organization of play time, space, and materials. At the last meeting of the Study Cycles, we sought to summarize the semester's discussions and debate the organization of play at EMEI Tupi, based on the questions: *What do we do? How do we do it? Why do we do it?* It was precisely during this meeting that the importance of planning was emphasized and that the word *intentionality* appeared most frequently in the teachers' statements:

When the teacher has a plan/ a goal that they will achieve in the classroom/ they will be teaching that content/ I think like this/ that planning is important in this sense/ what toys will I make available/ and like this/ what is the routine I'm planning to do that day/ that's why I say like this/ it's important to be planning/ not just arriving and throwing toys loosely / like this/ and that's it/ there needs to be a.../ a definition of what we will/ is to/ define on that day that we will teach (Silvana<sup>3</sup>, December 16, 2020).

It is clear that the meaning teachers attribute to planning is that, although it is important for guiding pedagogical actions, changes, broken expectations, and frustrations are part of the process. In the third meeting with the EMEI team, we showed part of a video from the research database in which two two-year-old children play with a cardboard box for over 20 minutes. We then discussed the class's history with that box, including how the children had appropriated it, the meanings and significance they attributed to this artifact, and its role in an activity room at an Early Childhood Education institution. The teachers then began to share their experiences using boxes and other unstructured materials, among which we highlight the words of teacher Cristina:

Sometimes the teacher makes this plan/ wants to bring/ into the classroom something super different/ a super elaborate toy/ then he goes there/ takes the toy inside a box/ what caught the child's attention was the box/ I've/ I've been through this several times/ [...] I didn't know whether to cry/ or laugh/ but I think it's all learning, right?/ the box was more important/ it was more in line with their reality/ so I started playing only with the boxes/ I left the toy aside/ we also have to take advantage of what they bring us/ right? (Cristina, September 30, 2020).

In this case, there was a culture shock, a shift in expectations, a difference between what was expected of the children and what actually happened. These moments are what Agar (2006) refers to as rich points or relevant points: "at which the differences in understanding, action, interpretation, and/or participation become marked," as defined by Green, Dixon & Zaharlick (2005, p. 40). Cristina's statement demonstrated how her pedagogical practices centered on the children, viewing them as active and culture-producing, rather than on the figure of the teacher. Ultimately, she changed her planning, valuing the children's interests. When describing the situation, the teacher states that "we also have to use what they bring us." Thus, an understanding was built within the group that it is the teachers' role, when faced with these broken expectations, to

be flexible—to take into account what the children are proposing—and perceptive, which implies being attentive and quickly changing the planning:

So, it's at that moment/ that I see the teacher's change of attitude/ he needs to change/ he needs to think/ gosh/ I'm going to have to think NOW/ what/ what I'm going to do with these kids/ and that's when it's worth/ it's worth us thinking about what they're doing/ right?/ what's their intention there/ at that moment (Leila, September 30, 2020)

Leila highlights the children's intentionality and provides a clue that the focus of education should not be on learning, on the product, on a tangible result, but rather on the play-development unity. This development, as the teachers emphasize, does not happen immediately, and part of the teacher's job is to understand that return can come much later than expected:

Yes/ over time, we see that return sometimes doesn't even come the following year (Valquíria, September 30, 2020).

Therefore, the teacher must organize, prepare, plan, and reflect, which, as Silvana emphasized, does not just consist of “throwing toys loosely / like this/ and that's it.” On the other hand, this work also requires a flexible, attentive, and perceptive approach to promote change and accommodate unexpected situations, thereby following the children's suggestions. Furthermore, it is necessary to acknowledge that feedback won't come immediately. However, all these aspects of teaching are, in a way, invisible, as the teachers point out:

Sometimes in this/ in the school environment itself/ we're there on a playground/ something/ sitting just observing/ someone from outside passes by/ and says something like/ wow/ she's just sitting there/ right?/ and in fact it goes far beyond just sitting there/ it's choosing an environment for the child to develop in a specific way/ changing that environment to see if they haven't developed well that way/ changing the environment/ and that's it/ the topic too/ it's/ how they're organized/ the environment/ the materials/ that will guide the child too/ right?(Vânia, September 30, 2020).

Thus, although the teacher's role is complex and comprehensive, professionals argue that this work is sometimes overlooked and undervalued, and at other times, it is misinterpreted. Here, the teacher also emphasizes the importance of the dialectical relationship between the person and their environment, i.e., how children's experiences with the environment can contribute to their cultural development. Furthermore, it is the teacher's role to understand this relationship between children and the cultural environment of EMEI-Tupi.

### *Provide the materials necessary for play development*

Discussing the work with play at EMEI Tupi required discussing the organization and availability of materials. In this context, teacher Amélia commented:

And inside the classrooms/ we don't have collective toys like that/ normally, the toys in the interior are toys that the teachers themselves bring/ last year I felt a bit of this/ this lack of materials/ of these toys/ because the same toys that were there last year were from the year before/ at least in the upper part/ few toys arrived/ we had little funding allocated for this/ right?/ (...) and/ due to the conditions we have/ we can't

always take to school.../ a toy designed specifically for doing that type of work/ right?/ (...) so I think this lack of materials sometimes makes it a bit difficult/ and we try to be creative (Amélia, September 30, 2020).

This statement echoes many other statements from teachers at EMEI Tupi, who have taken on the role of providing the materials needed for play, either by purchasing them with their own money or through donation campaigns, which in turn impacts the institution's pedagogical practices. The teachers attribute this situation to a lack of municipal funding, a lack seen as natural and normalized:

This happens in every public school I've worked in/ I don't know if it happens in the private school system (Vitória, December 2, 2020).

The teachers explained that toys for shared use are kept outside the classrooms, organized by theme in separate boxes, while toys purchased or collected by the teachers themselves are stored inside the classrooms. Commenting on this situation, teacher Antônia states:

And this [organization] has been going on for/ I don't know if it's two/ or three years/ that we've been doing this/ because of this issue where the city government really doesn't have the funding/ and it's working really well (Antônia, December 16, 2020).

In this sense, the teachers' statements, on the one hand, denounce a reality of Early Childhood Education, but, on the other, they normalize a situation by stating that this "happens in every public school system" and that the city government "really doesn't have the funding," seeming to indicate the idea that reality is as it is and cannot be changed. According to Freire (1996), this perspective leads to a "discourse of praise for adaptation, taken as fate or destiny" (p. 39), as can be seen in teacher Wanda's speech when commenting on the situation, valuing her colleagues' effort, care, and affection in bringing something considered important to the group:

I see a lot of care/ a lot of care in that too/ you know/ it's something I can talk about because I see/ right?/ I've seen a lot/ and I'm sure it won't stop there (Wanda, December 2, 2020).

Furthermore, the role that teachers assume in providing the materials necessary for the development of play has also caused tensions in the individual-collective relationship. In one of the meetings, the progress of group work at the institution was discussed; however, the team pointed out the need to consider collective organization within the classrooms as well, which was highlighted as a space still very individual for the teacher. Since each teacher assumes responsibility for acquiring their own materials, this, on the one hand, generates an attitude of care and concern with these materials, as they do not want them to get damaged; but, on the other hand, it conflicts with the nature of teaching at EMEI, which is very collective. Thus, the teachers reveal different practices with the materials:

I recognize myself as this individualistic/ when it comes to my classroom materials/ you know/ it's/ mainly for one reason/ because they're fragile/ you know. (Antônia, December 16, 2020).

Cover the ears/ because I also have a box that stays inside my closet/ I'm very jealous of it (Jany, December 16, 2020).

I've always left my locker open/ everyone knows that/ right?/ I've never been one to lock my locker with a key/ so I think we should respect what belongs to others/ there's nothing wrong with someone coming/ and opening my locker/ taking my stuff/ you know/ there's no problem at all/ but one has to be careful after using it (Leila, December 16, 2020).

In a contrastive analysis of the discourses, she reveals the contradictions of valuing the preservation of materials, since they were individually acquired, but also of needing to share them collectively, since not doing so would have a situated meaning of an individualistic attitude, evidenced by Jany's request that the participants "cover the ears" when announcing that she keeps a box in her locker. As Green and Gee (1998) point out, "situated meanings do not simply reside in individual minds; they are often negotiated between people in and through social interaction" (p. 122/123).

### *Expanding children's play experiences concerning gender*

The discussion of gender issues permeated all Study Cycle meetings with the EMEI Tupi team. In this article, we understand gender according to Scott's (1995) perspective as a relational and historical category that cannot be understood outside the power relations and cultural constructions of a given society at a given time. According to the author, the definition of gender consists of the integral connection between two propositions: "(1) gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and (2) gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (Scott, 1995, p. 86).

During the Study Cycles, one of the literary readings included an excerpt from the book *Tudo de bom vai acontecer* [Everything Good Will Happen] (Atta, 2013), which reflected on feminism, the status of women in society, and the achievements already made. Later, the teachers discussed what it means to be a woman and shared personal stories of their experiences. This led to a discussion about the importance of the teacher's role in expanding children's possibilities in play, so as not to limit them to what is considered *gender-appropriate*. In other words, the need emerged to deconstruct the idea of boys' and girls' play, to offer equal development opportunities for all, as we can see in teacher Rita's words:

It's cool/ right?/ for children to play/ like this/ what can we do/ the actions we can take to reflect progress/ these advances, even in this case/ machismo/ what children can and cannot play/ what we're doing/ what we've provided/ To even allow people to think/ children/ right?/ think differently/ have different experiences than they would have at home (Rita, September 16, 2020).

Rita argues that teachers should take a stance of expanding children's experiences, not limiting them to what they can and cannot play based on their gender. It seems to be the teacher's role, from Rita's perspective, to position themselves to promote progress and contribute to broader social problems, such as machismo, in everyday actions. She points to the need for "children to have different experiences than they would have at home." However, while adopting this position brings progress, as Rita points out, the group noted that tensions can also arise with families. The teachers report being questioned by families when

trying to broaden the children's experiences. All the complaints reported concern boys playing with toys associated with the *feminine universe*. Cristina, for example, points out that she created a toy project in which the children were asked to bring toys from home, which involved collaboration with their families. She says that, on the day they were requested to bring a car, all the girls participated. However, on Doll Day, the families refused to send dolls for the boys to play with:

I had a lot of problems with families/ because/ because of this issue/ then/ they came to question me/ oh/ but a boy is going to bring a doll?/ Guys/ the project is about toys/ on Toy Car Day, all the girls brought toy cars/ why can't boys on Doll Day?/ Why?/ Will he be less of a man because of this?/ So it was a/ it wasn't a problem/ it was a discussion that we had, but.../ then I talked to the parents/ explained the project/ the objective of the project, which was to play/ share and everything/ but like this/ it happened/ it was cool/ but it wasn't what I expected/ because they really resist (Cristina, September 16, 2020).

What Cristina argues in her toy project reinforces what authors like Buss-Simão (2013) discuss about how surveillance and pressure for gender conformity are much greater in boys than in girls. In this sense, "for boys, the need to be 'non-feminine' is more imperative than for girls to be 'non-masculine'" (Buss-Simão, 2013, p. 183). Thus, gender issues involve numerous disputes and tensions, which can affect teachers' pedagogical practices, as in the case described by Cristina. It is also necessary to reflect on the relationships between families and schools. Given this tension, what is the teacher's role? What concerns underlie these families' questions? How can we engage in dialogue with them about this topic? These were questions raised in the Study Cycles, not necessarily being answered, but bringing reflection on the role of the teacher, which can be summarized in the words of researcher Vanessa:

About the role of the adult/ right?/ in pretend play/ is/ the.../ we're also going to encourage/ the boys to play?/ Are we also going to propose?/ For the boys?/ Not just based on what the boys are doing/ but we're also going to sit down and talk/ everyone, let's talk here?/ Let's talk here?/ Why isn't the little boy playing/ why isn't João playing house?/ Would we also have this role?/ Of not just welcoming the children's interest but also of proposing and questioning, together with them, these representations that circulate in society?/ So/ in this sense, perhaps it's taking.../ a step further/ a step toward thinking about.../ isn't it.../ our role also of proposing and questioning the very representations that the children are bringing/ also together with their families (Vanessa, December 2, 2020).

Vanessa's statement prompts us to consider the role of teachers in expanding the experiences of babies and young children, proposing challenges to them and their families, and aiming to transform their relationships with the environment in which they live, thereby transforming experiences into lived experiences. Thus, we can see the movement of the dialectical unity of play and development that involves the indivisibility between [affect-to-situated social cognition-cultures-languages in use], ACCL, as advocated by Gomes (2020) and Gomes and Neves (2021).

### *Actively participate in play whenever possible*

During the Study Cycles, teachers consistently highlighted the enriching moments when they actively participate in play, taking on

pretend play roles and playing alongside the children. Emília recounts the children's reactions when she adopts this approach:

So/ they thought/ wow/ the teacher is playing/ so they were very excited about it/ of course not everyone has the energy/ and I don't either.../ it wasn't all the time or every day/ but if you participate with them there in play/ wow/ the results are infinitely better (Emília, September 30, 2020).

In this speech, it is clear how excited the children were about the teacher's participation in the plays. In the statement "wow/ the teacher is playing," Emília seems to report her perception of a surprised expression on the children's faces, as if they had not expected the teacher, the adult, to play with them in this way and with this level of involvement. Furthermore, she states that participation yields "infinitely better" results, suggesting the creation of Zones of Proximal Development through collaboration between the teacher and children during play. Furthermore, this production is beneficial not only for the children but also for the teachers, who reflect on how much they learn and develop through this collaboration, highlighting play as important for adults as well:

I/ I see it like this, right?/ that even adults/ have a.../ a very important way of learning/ when they interact with children in general/ right?/ in a broad way they.../ they are always there awakening curiosity in the child/ and vice versa/ the child also awakens our curiosity/ right?/ that through a question from a child/ right?/ we adults can reflect more on our.../ on our attitudes/ right?/ in our speech/ so it is.../ it is at this/ it is at this point that I think that the child is always teaching us/ right?/ and that we learn from them through the child's curiosity/ it makes us reflect/ sometimes even change certain attitudes of ours as adults/ right?/ in relation to SEEING/ seeing the world/ seeing that child/ so/ the child's coexistence with the adult is very important/ right? (Leila, 02/09/2020).

Thus, as Freire (1996) points out, teaching is not transferring knowledge: "those who form are formed and reformed by forming, and those who are formed are formed and form by being formed" (p. 13). Thus, it is in the experience, in the relationship between children and teachers with play that cultural development can happen, understanding experience as "a unity in which, on the one hand, the environment [play] and what is experienced are represented in an indivisible way, and, on the other hand, how I [teachers and children] experience this" (Vigotski, 2018, p. 78). However, despite these benefits brought by and to teachers, they are not always able to participate in this way:

So I think it's very worthwhile when you join in the fun/ not just any professional can help, right?/ who sometimes doesn't have that enthusiasm/ that charisma (Vânia, September 30, 2020).

It can be seen that teachers attribute this inability to always participate to individual characteristics, such as enthusiasm and charisma, in Vânia's case, and energy, in Emília's. However, it is also possible to consider the relationships between micro and macro, which involve broader issues such as the workload of teachers in Early Childhood Education. Due to low pay, many professionals are forced to work two shifts, resulting in a workweek exceeding 44 hours. This leads to real fatigue, and enthusiasm and willingness may not always be present. Salary conditions also need to be discussed, as pointed out by the

teachers at EMEI Tupi, since part of their pay is used to purchase toys and materials necessary for their work. As Freire (1996) warns, the teachers' struggle to defend their rights and for less immoral wages must be understood as a crucial moment in their practice: "it is not something that comes from outside the teaching activity, but something that is part of it" (p. 34). Therefore, one question to be asked is: how can we create favorable working conditions that allow teachers to participate more actively in play?

### **Final Considerations**

Through this work, we gain insight into the complexities and tensions inherent in teaching in Early Childhood Education. The role of teachers in play involves primarily transforming experiences into life experiences, even if this encompasses conflict with some families; proposing and actively participating in play, but without losing sight of the children's leading role; training and self-training, teaching, but also learning; fighting for better working conditions, but also providing the necessary materials to ensure the quality of education for infants and young children.

Vygotsky (2009) states that "creation, in truth, exists not only when great historical works are created, but everywhere humankind imagines, combines, modifies, and creates something new, even if this newness resembles a tiny grain" (p. 17). In this sense, we argue that the creation of something new occurs in the daily work of teaching, in the interaction between children and adults, mediated by the production of senses and meanings in play in the context of EMEI-Tupi. Thus, in the Study Cycles, through the sharing of experiences and reflections on play, development possibilities were created for researchers and teachers and, consequently, for infants and young children. This development is situated within the culture of EMEI-Tupi, revealed by emotions, affections, and different languages in use, such as gestures, crying, smiles, hugs, spoken and written language, i.e., by the dialectic of development that involves [affection-situated social cognition-cultures-languages in use], as in play, also seen here as a language. Thus, we hope that this study will contribute to a deeper reflection on the role of teachers in play activities, providing theoretical, methodological, and empirical support that illuminates teaching knowledge, challenges normative discourses, and broadens understandings of play as the guiding activity for development in Early Childhood Education.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is a fictitious name to protect the institution's identity.
- <sup>2</sup> This manual is intended for the daycare age group (0 to 3 years and 11 months), with the justification that this group has historically been excluded from the public education system.
- <sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms have replaced the names of all teachers.

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