ARTICLE

Relationships between role-plays and the psychic development of children aged 5–6 years*

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ABSTRACT

This study reflects on the relationship between role-plays and the psychic development of children aged 5 to 6 years from the perspective of cultural-historical psychology. As an example, we present excerpts of role-playing games, selected from the ones observed and filmed during six sessions of 45 minutes each, involving 12 children in preschool. The results allow inferences about their experiences and the context in which they live. At the same time, role-plays expand higher psychological processes, as they enable children to transition between actions with concrete objects and actions with meaning. We emphasize that the child experiences manifested in the games denounce serious social issues faced by educators today. Thus, the teacher must recognize and favor the educational potential of role-playing; however, the challenge of educating the contemporary child requires public policies beyond the classroom environment.

KEYWORDS

higher psychological processes; child development; cultural-historical psychology.

RELAÇÕES ENTRE OS JOGOS DE PAPÉIS E O DESENVOLVIMENTO PSÍQUICO DE CRIANÇAS DE 5–6 ANOS

RESUMO

Reflete-se sobre a relação entre os jogos de papéis e o desenvolvimento psíquico de crianças entre 5 e 6 anos, na perspectiva da psicologia histórico-cultural. Apresentam-se, como exemplos, excertos de jogos de papéis, selecionados entre os observados e filmados durante seis sessões de 45 minutos cada, envolvendo 12 crianças da educação infantil. Os resultados possibilitam inferências sobre suas vivências e o contexto em que interagem. Ao mesmo tempo, os jogos de papeis ampliam os processos funcionais superiores, na medida em que possibilitam às crianças uma transição entre ações com objetos concretos e ações com significados. Destaca-se que as vivências infantis manifestas nos jogos denunciam as graves questões sociais atuais. Assim, é importante que o professor reconheça e favoreça o potencial educativo dos jogos de papéis, porém para além do espaço em sala de aula, são necessárias políticas públicas que possibilitem enfrentar o desafio de educar a criança contemporânea.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

funções psicológicas superiores; desenvolvimento infantil; psicologia histórico-cultural.

RELACIONES ENTRE LOS JUEGOS DE PAPELES Y EL DESARROLLO PSÍQUICO DE NIÑOS DE 5–6 AÑOS

RESUMEN

Se reflexiona sobre la relación entre los juegos de roles y el desarrollo psíquico de niños de 5 a 6 años, en la perspectiva de la psicología histórico-cultural. Se presentan, como ejemplos, extractos de juegos de papeles, seleccionados entre los observados y filmados durante seis sesiones de 45 minutos, involucrando a 12 niños de educación infantil. Los resultados posibilitam inferencias sobre sus subjetividades y sobre el contexto en que viven. Al mismo tiempo, los juegos de papeles amplían los procesos funcionales superiores, en la medida en que posibilitan a los niños una transición entre acciones con objetos concretos y acciones con significados. Se destaca que las vivencias infantiles manifestadas en los juegos denuncian las graves cuestiones sociales actuales. Así, es importante que el profesor reconozca y favorezca el potencial educativo de los juegos de papeles, pero más allá del espacio en el aula, son necesarias políticas públicas que posibiliten enfrentar el desafío de educar al niño contemporáneo.

PALABRAS CLAVE

funciones psicológicas superiores; desarrollo infantil; psicología histórico-cultural.

INTRODUCTION

This article[1] is based on cultural-historical psychology, which comprises child development as a dialectical process of appropriation and objectification expressed in social relations. On the biological basis constituted by the organism, the internalized living experiences interfere and resize possibilities, interests, and typical needs of each child, who then demonstrates their own ways of acting in their relationships.

In this sense, psychological development begins as children internalize the ways of acting and speaking collectively constructed by humanity. It is not just a process of growth but of new syntheses, involving psychic reorganizations, in which the cultural and biological dimensions are fused, even if one aspect cannot be reduced to the other. There is no linearity. Since the child is situated in a reality that involves scientific, technical, and artistic knowledge that has been historically constructed by humanity, as humankind needed to work to satisfy their biological needs and survive, past processes are articulated with later processes, in a dialectical relationship of transformation and change.

Vygotsky's studies about the historicity of the psyche reveal that the biological characteristics of the human species require that people work to survive. Collective work demands and promotes technological, scientific, and cultural progress, favoring the individual regarding cultural appropriation, based on the internalization of signs, and enabling them to develop psychological processes, that is, the psychic forms that allow them to function socially.

With historical, cultural, and technological development, the biological needs, while vital, become secondary when ensured, and humankind favors complex social needs that motivate human activity and foster the emergence and development of consciousness. These needs are originally subjected to social relations and condition the genesis of the psychic image, enabling neuronal structures to become increasingly complex (Leontiev, 1978; Luria, 1991).

It is noteworthy, therefore, that consciousness does not originate solely from the subjective world, nor is it the result of a merely biological process, since it is formed in the subject's relations with the world around them. It is a dialectical movement in which consciousness regulates the way the subject performs their own activity at the same time that this consciousness is expanding, that is, increasing the internal representation of the external world, an appropriation that depends on the activity of the individual.

This constant process occurs as a result of the subject's participation in shared activities, enabling them, from an organic and cultural intersection, to develop their higher psychological processes. These processes consist of conscious and controlled actions such as abstracting, reasoning, voluntary attention, perception, feelings, mediated memory, language, and will, among others.

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1   Article originally written in Portuguese and translated into English. Revision of English translation provided by James Russell Lowrey, Cascavel, Paraná, Brazil, January 2020.

In fact, before being considered psychological, these typically human functions permeate the relationships between people, in an interpersonal process that becomes intrapersonal. Thus, the biological view that perceived this process as unhistorical and natural proves to be fragile, and the concept of sign – analogous to that of instrument, which mediates the material relationship between humankind and the world – that acts as a psychic mediator in this relationship becomes fundamental.

Therefore, higher psychological processes are nothing more than the result of a continuous process of transformation of biological functions from the appropriation of sign systems. The appropriation and use of signs enable functional processes to surpass the boundaries of the organic system of activities, and, consequently, behaviors can become consciously planned and controlled. In this regard, function is understood as an action that "[…] begins externally" (Martins, 2013, p. 98), since these changes in psychic development occur through the activities that children perform in their daily lives.

ACTIVITY CONCEPT

Activity is defined as "[…] the way/means by which children establish relations with the external reality in order to satisfy their needs" (Martins, 2006, p. 30). In this context, the main or leading activity stands out, that is, one that promotes "the most important changes in the child's psychic development, allowing the evolution of psychic processes that prepare the way for the child's transition to a new and higher level of development" (Leontiev, 2014, p. 122).

Based on Vygotsky's studies and assimilating Leontiev's category of activity, Elkonin (1987) investigated the leading activity and its characteristics, as well as the driving forces that enable the passage between the periods that make up psychic development: early childhood, childhood, and adolescence. Each period is subdivided into two groups: one concerning motivation and needs, and another related to technical and operational possibilities. Next, we highlight the main aspects of the first two, which relate to the object of the present study:

1. In early childhood — which starts at birth and ends approximately at 1 year of age, involving the stages of direct emotional communication —, the baby's communication with adults is the main activity. During this period, the child's contact with the world is socially mediated and dependent. Their possibilities for manipulating the objects that are part of their reality are developing. Also, in the affective and motor relations with their caregivers, the child begins the process of assimilating human tasks, motives, and norms, as well as the relationships between people.

In this way, the first technical and operational possibilities for object manipulation starts, and, through language and adult demonstration, the child appropriates the socially elaborated procedures of action with objects. "Thus, direct communication 'child-adult' (gradually) gives way to indirect communication 'child-object actions-adult'" (Elkonin, 2009, p. 215).

2. The second period is called childhood and comprises the role-playing leading activity (1st group), approximately from three to 6 years old, and the study leading activity (2nd group), approximately from 6 years old to early adolescence. In this period, the child develops their language skills and expands their sign system through social mediation. By using role-playing games, the child seizes the concrete world of human objects as they imitate the actions performed by adults with these objects.

Little by little, study becomes the leading activity for children, upon entering elementary school. "At school, children have duties and tasks to fulfill, and, for the first time in their development, they have the impression that they are performing truly important activities" (Facci, 2004, p. 70). The relationship of the child with adults around them is mediated through studying, that is, changes occur in their personal communication with family and in the organization of their daily routine. The assimilation of new knowledge happens during this leading activity, and school teaching should direct the child toward this study activity (Elkonin, 2009).

Among these periods, in view of the objectives proposed in the present study, this research focuses on the second period – childhood –, highlighting its leading activity, that is, the role-playing. Thus, we developed field research to discuss this concept and the contribution of role-playing games in the constitution of psychic development, as follows.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the reference presented, the field research involved children aged 5 to 6 years, attending preschool to verify how role-playing games manifest themselves in children's play. The analysis of the enacted roles and the children's speech reveals unfamiliar thoughts, needs, and representations expressed by the children. Furthermore, the objective was to grasp the meanings of these representations, from a dialectical reflection between theoretical assumptions and empirical data, seeking to overcome them by going beyond what appearances reveal in order to understand the individual.

Data were generated in a public educational institution, suggested through a previous contact with the Municipal Secretary of Education, for its availability for the research and for presenting characteristics common to any school in the municipality, since the part contains the properties of the whole, and "the process apprehended [...] may reveal something constitutive of [...] [other institutions] living in similar conditions" (Aguiar, 2001, p. 140).

The observations occurred in the only preschool class working in the afternoon, involving the main teacher and 12 children; two 5-year-olds and ten 6-year-olds; 6 girls and 6 boys.

In phase I of the research, with six hours of observation distributed over three days, each child was limited to bringing one toy on Friday, during the last class hour to participate in the "Toy Day", as named by the institution. This limitation of time and space was reflected in the playing, curbing the evolution of role-playing.

Given the objective of this research, the development of phase II involved organizing a physical environment with toys and readjusting the period of the pedagogical activities, which provided more free time for role-playing to emerge. In this phase, the library space was used to organize the play materials (dolls, toys related to the professions of doctor, teacher, mechanic, and hairdresser, as well as cars, kitchen utensils, tents, etc.), since an adequate setting favored the interaction between children.

> The key is to understand that these learning possibilities result from sponta-neous processes but require some mediating elements (internal and external). Internal mediators are, for example, the memories of situations, perceptions, feelings, expectations, and needs of children, which are presented throughout the daily experience. […] Important external mediators for children are toys, ar-tifacts (objects, clothing, etc.), and, in particular, the presence of other children […]. (Oliveira, 2011, p. 143)

The filming in phase II, which took place over 15 days, involved six sessions of 45 minutes each, totaling 4h30min, later transcribed for analysis. Although school hours had been altered and a space for role-playing, artificially created, we can consider that the artificiality refers to school dynamics, not to the children's per-formance during role-playing.

In the sessions, the recordings were discontinuous because they only regis-tered the moments and games in which the role-playing appeared. We sought to record them from the beginning (or at least when the researcher identified them) until their completion, which occurred due to several aspects, such as: interference of another child, change of theme, work area, or toy.

Two people and two cameras filmed the sessions, which allowed them to record more episodes and perceive their details. During the recordings, we tried to interfere as little as possible in the interactions between the children, doing so only when requested, which rarely happened. In the transcript, the speeches of each child were identified with the initial letter of the first name and, when necessary, the second name. The classroom teacher was referred to as P1 and the observer as P2.

THE PATH OF ANALYSIS

To understand the constant movement of the construction of the psyche, we need to identify what moves it, that is, the use of signs. The signs used make it possible to analyze their social and personal meaning, allowing us to go beyond what is apparent and think of processes, objects, or situations not previously revealed. The signs appropriated by the subject were first external before becoming internal, being established as instruments in the process of mediation that both allowed the appropriation of signs and was the object at the moment of playing, enabling new understandings of the social.

The analysis of results did not consider the functional processes separately in the episodes because "the specific transformations of each function determine changes in the set of functions of which they are part, that is, of the psyche as a whole" (Martins, 2013, p. 70).

> Just as the use of one tool or another determines the whole mechanism of the work operation, so the nature of the sign used is the fundamental factor upon which the entire process [of the development of higher psychological processes] depends. The essential relationship underlying the upper structure is the special form of organization of the entire process, which is built on the introduction into the situation of certain artificial stimuli that play the role of signs. (Vygotsky, 1995, p. 123, our translation)

Thus, understanding the words/signs was the starting point for data analysis. However, "to understand the individual's speech, [...] we must understand their thinking (which is always emotionally based), we must grasp the *meaning of speech*. The meaning is [...] the unity of thought and language" (Aguiar, 2001, p. 130).

FUNCTIONAL PROCESSES AND ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

The term "role-play" is used to denote unstructured make-believe playing with implied rules and defined roles whereby children reproduce adult social roles to fit into society (Elkonin, 1987). As adult and child social relations have historically diversified, role-plays have emerged as a psychological necessity. Therefore, its origin is related to "very concrete social conditions of the child's life in society and not to the action of innate instinctive energy [...]" (Elkonin, 2009, p. 80).

For this reason, role-playing games do not appear to be spontaneous but rather invented by children based on the relationships established between adults and between adults and children (Elkonin, 2009). The main feature of the playful activity in role-plays is the fact that the child creates a fictional situation to perform an adult role, attributing meaning to it and transferring this meaning from one object to another.

To understand the meaning of role-playing for children, we initially sought their central themes, organizing and transcribing them in 23 episodes. The criterion for the clippings in the film was the presence of role-playing during the activity and the quality of the record, that is, if children's speeches were understandable, since, due to the noise and the microphone range, some lines were inaudible. Chart 1 presents the episodes created by the children in their role-plays.

The most frequent scenario was "house" (which appeared 6 times), followed by "school" (5 times), "doll" (4 times), "doctor" (3 times), "make-up" (twice), and "salesperson", "rescue team", and "mechanic" (once each).

We found that children used the themes "house" and "school" more often, since they represent the relational field in this age group, which focuses mainly on family, school, child care, and the roles of mother and educator, as also observed by Oliveira (2011).

DEEPENING THE ANALYSIS

In the second level of analysis, three nuclei of meaning were established, highlighting the contradictory situations most commonly observed in the games: "The appropriate. The inappropriate". "The said. The unsaid"; "I want to be... You cannot be".

The first nucleus, "The appropriate. The inappropriate", reflected the social approval considering gender issues and was based on the children's speeches referring to toys suitable for boys or girls.

The analyses of the second nucleus, "The said. The unsaid", aimed to demonstrate the explicit and implicit elements that emerged in role-playing situations so as to understand the subjects' thought processes.

**Chart 1 – Role-playing episodes interpreted by
5–6-year-old children: role-play scenario and title.**

Role-playing scenario (theme)	Role-playing title
House I	So what if it is for a girl...
House II	Caramel popcorn
House III	Mom wants
House IV	Wine or juice?
House V	Playing on the toboggan
House VI	Working mother
School I	Angry teacher
School II	The doctor's visit
School III	Drawing or make-up?
School IV	Can I be a teacher?
School V	Drugs!
Doll I	Panties!
Doll II	One day I'll have...
Doll III	I take care of my baby sister
Doll IV	Cat fur
Doctor I	The injection
Doctor II	The doctor's appointment
Doctor III	Beating
Make-up I	Getting ready for the party
Make–up II	I want to play with this...
Salesman	All for free!
Rescue team	Rescuing
Mechanic	Fixing the truck

Source: Research database (2015).

The final nucleus, "I want to be... You cannot be", was based on the preferences expressed by the subjects for playing a certain role and obtaining or not the authorization from their peers, allowing them to play.

However, even though each nucleus of meaning had its specificity, they interacted with each other, and their determinations resulted from the historical processes constituting them.

In the third level of analysis, we assessed each subject on their relations during the role-playing activity, taking into account the contents expressed by them to identify how the established nuclei of meaning manifested in their speech. At the same time, some constitutive aspects of each subject were analyzed in an attempt to comprehend social characteristics that enabled their formation.

In discussing sense and meaning, we sought to understand them as constituted by the relationship between the symbolic and the emotional (Aguiar and Ozella, 2006), recognizing the cognitive-symbolic and emotional aspects as inseparable. Thus, the following is the analysis of the subjects' lines in some situations of the role-plays.

In playing adult roles, the child appropriates the social meaning of human productive activities, and their conduct is guided by this appropriation. However, the role-playing is unpredictable, and, in the end, the child might not always find the pleasure or satisfy the needs that led them to play. As shown in the game: *So what if it is for a girl...*

> Z. (6-year-old boy) is alone inside a pink tent playing with the popcorn maker (miniature object toy). L.G. (6-year-old boy) and M. (6-year-old boy) remain outside, talking and watching their colleague inside.
>
> Z.: "— *Go get the prince for me*" (addressing M.). C. (6-year-old girl) approaches, and Z. invites her: "— *Let's play here?*"; "— *How can I help?*" (leaves the tent). "— *I'll have to take off the slipper*" (putting on the slippers that were outside the tent). The invitation to C. seems to be necessary for him to play in the pink tent, as his fellow boys refuse to play inside it.
>
> Within seconds, Z. returns to the cabin, barefoot, slips in, and sits on the floor. He tries to close the "door" (attaching one piece of fabric to another with velcro).
>
> Z.: "— *Oh, Ma has the keys...*" (Z. tells M., who is outside watching what he does).
>
> L.G.: "— *Want I put there for you, Z.?*" (offering to help him join the velcro parts to close the tent door).
>
> Z. just smiles but does not authorize L.G. to help him.
>
> M.: "— *Hey, Z., let me tells you something in the little hole there?*" (M. approaches the tent, smiles, kneels next to the small window, and whispers something to Z. who is inside. We assume that, since the tent is pink, he tells his friend that a boy cannot play inside. Then he walks away).
>
> Z.: "— *So what if it is for a girl...*" (Z. stays in the tent playing alone with the popcorn maker. After some time, Z. leaves and the game ends). (Episode 224-226 – 12/1/2014)

Moments before when playing house with the colleague L.G., Z. had dismantled the existing house that 1103 the girls had played and reassembled it under the table. This action of 1104 setting up a new house in a less visible place is necessary for them to allow themselves 1105 to play with the same toys the girls had previously used.

What drives a child to play is their unrealistic needs that arise from the perception of challenges or actions that cannot be accomplished due to their physical and psychological limitations. Therefore, the role-playing itself does not trigger these needs, as they already existed (Prestes, 2010).

The child's primary concern is not learning to use human objects or being able to perform genuine adult tasks. Role-playing is an activity in which the motive is in its own process. Stating that the reason for playing is in the process means that, in fact, role-playing is not centered on the objects the child uses to represent different situations, or even on the characters they portray. Proof of this is that the children, at the end of the game, pick up the toys or objects, leave their characters behind, and become themselves again.

Despite not objectively presenting a drawing or object made, there was a product: the act of playing. This product is an affective-emotional state, which allows children to "ensure their success through relationships that can be established [...] during or at the end of the action" (Elkonin, 2009, p. 220), as in the game "Wine or juice?"

> L.H. (6-year-old boy) plays with the toy stove and has a glass and a cup in his hand. L.G. (6-year-old boy) has a puppet, which he rapidly brings closer to his colleague, while L.H. dodges every time.
>
> L.H.: "— *Hey, wan...wan wine?? Wan wine?? Hey... wan wine?? Hey... wan wine, you drunk?*" (L.G. now rubs the puppet on the stove and does not answer his colleague's question). "— *Hey... wan wine?*" (L.G. puts the puppet on L.H.'s face several times, which he does not like. The last time he is asked, he rubs the puppet on L.H.'s face).
>
> L.H.: "— *Hey... stop! Or I'll tell the teacher. Hey... wan some wine?*" (L.G. continues to move the puppet, now rubbing it on the stove. L.H. pretends to fill the glass and drink. L.G. slightly shakes his head "no").
>
> Every time L.H. asked L.G. if he wanted wine, the latter did not answer, just moved the puppet. After he threatened to tell the teacher, L.H. stopped bothering his colleague.
>
> L.H.: "— *I have a cup to you...*" (he fills the little cup and gives it to the puppet, L.G. also helps). "— *He can hav juice*". (L.H. moves the puppet as if it would swallow the liquid. They both pretend the puppet drank the juice). (Episode DSC 287 – 12/8/2014)

The child does not represent an adult with a particular profession or performs actions/tasks typical of the adult world, such as cooking/cutting the food. Their main focus is the relations that adults establish with each other when using objects, which manifest in the child's relationships with other children or adults.

As Elkonin (2009, p. 31) states: "[...] the role-playing game is influenced, above all, by human activity, work, and relations between people [...]; therefore, the fundamental content of the role assumed by the child is precisely the reformulation of this aspect of reality".

What the child wants to convey is evident in the different themes that will constitute the content revealed in the role-plays. Therefore, this reconstruction of the adult role chosen by the child is linked to their concrete life conditions and relationships.

> The conversion of the girl into the mother, and the doll into the daughter, allows the act of bathing, feeding, and preparing food to become the child's responsibility. These actions [in which various tasks are implicit, such as preparing the bath, cooling the baby's food, etc.] manifest the activities performed by the mother with her child, her love and tenderness, or even the opposite [...]. (Elkonin, 2009, p. 404-405)

In this sense, in the role-playing, representation has as function beyond interpreting the relationships characteristic of the role: it identifies the model behavior portrayed by the interpreter or other participants. The child has relative freedom at this point because they have to adjust their conduct to the role, following its rules. Thus, freedom is an illusion. Therefore, Elkonin (2009) considers the game a school of arbitrary conduct.

An example is the game "Panties!"

> L.H. (6-year-old boy) and T. (6-year-old boy) are sitting on the couch and playing with various small toys, such as Polly doll clothes and accessories.
> T.: "— *Where's other' doll ???*"
> L.H.: "— *I don't know...*"
> Both go searching for the Polly doll, looking over the couch and nearby. They find it. L.H. puts the boot on the doll, and T. holds a baby bottle.
> T.: "— *Do you have a nipple?*"
> L.H. keeps trying to put the boot on the doll, finding it difficult.
> T.: "— *What about the shirt?*"
> L.H. makes a face of discontent and looks for something.
> T.: "— *Here's nother boot...*" (he gives it to L.H. to put on the doll). "— *This skirt goes where... It's a shirt...*" (he wants to warn that the skirt is wrongly dressed, as it is a shirt and not a skirt).
> L.H.: "— *What?*"
> T.: "— *It's a shirt...*"
> L.H.: "— *I don't know...*" (looks for something and grabs the doll's panties). "— *These are... PANTIES!!!...*" (he drops them quickly, makes a disgusted face showing his tongue, leaves everything behind, and goes away).
> They disperse, ending the game. (Episode 92 – 12/04/2014)

A fundamental aspect of role-playing is providing the opportunity to experience the standards of conduct present in adult relationships, enabling the child,

while interpreting, to submit to the rules that the adult role requires. Rule-based relationships are the source of the development of child morals.

Thus, role-playing fosters the child's knowledge of social reality at a conscious and broad level of understanding. However, we must remember that the full "[...] psychic development of playing depends on the richness of the child's access to knowledge about the world (or lack thereof) [...] [it depends on] their *living conditions and education*" (Pasqualini, 2013, p. 90).

The creation of the imaginary situation, the definition of specific rules, and the child's ability to control their behavior to achieve a certain end in role-playing situations are fundamental to their cognitive development, as it produces a zone of proximal development (ZPD).[2] They start to behave in a more evolved way than in real life activities and thus learn to separate object and meaning, which contributes to their development, since "[...] performing this action [which they have not yet mastered in reality] resolves the contradiction between the need to act and the inability to carry out the tasks required by the action" (Facci, 2004, p. 69).

These considerations lead to the understanding that what determines the acceptance or refusal to play are the knowledge and ideas, the meaning and the sense that children have about the fundamental content of the role-play being interpreted. All these elements constitute the standards of conduct that permeate adult relationships, as observed in the game "Can I be a teacher?", for which a brief description and some excerpts are given below.

In this game, the children portray the daily life of the classroom and the activities performed by students and teacher, among them, the teaching and writing of letters. Despite not being directly involved in playing school, L.H. tries to be accepted and experiences the conflict between wanting and not being able to be a teacher because his colleague refuses him.

> L.H. enters the classroom and sits next to classmate A.M. (5-year-old girl) who plays the role of the teacher and coordinates the game.
> A.M.: "— *Don't mess with things... Do you also want to be a teacher?*"
> L.H.: "— *Yes*".
> A.M.: "— *Okay... so you have to get some things first…*" (she keeps L.H. waiting, not saying what he should look for. She does not pay attention to him).
> [...]
> L.H. intervenes because he is already impatiently waiting for A.M. to say what he should seek.
> L.H.: "— *Get some things?...*"
> She still does not answer L.H., while paying attention and talking with other participants of the game.
> [...]

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2   The Imminent Development Zone (IDZ) corresponds to the Proximal Development Zone (PDZ), expression used before the translation work of Zoia Prestes (2010).

L.H. leaves to get some things, when he returns, he gives A.M. some EVA puppets.

L.H.: "— *See... I brought puppets*".

She takes the puppets, but soon lays them on the floor, without giving any importance to them. L.H. sits back down, still waiting to be able to play.

The eminently human psychic functions are revealed and mobilized in the game, enabling the child to interact in the world. Among them are the perception and attention to the objects that surround them, the memory of experienced situations, emotions, volition — when wanting to play a certain role, the conduct guided by the demands of the role, with their thinking leading their actions and their language enabling interaction. Nonetheless, as stated by Martins (2013), these functions manifest and come into action together, constantly relating to one another, as without their participation, both expressed and internalized, there can be no role-playing.

In this scenario, the other participants must accept the role played by a group member. What reasons lead the child to think that their peer will not be able to play the same role they play, in this case, that of the teacher? Why does A.M. find L.H. unable to be a teacher and therefore tries to deceive him by asking him to look for "some things first", which she does not specify? It seems like she just wants to keep him deluded and under her power. Even when he takes the initiative to bring some objects, A.M. ignores them and still does not authorize him to be a teacher, perhaps not to relinquish this role.

For the first time, L.H. shows interest in playing the role of the teacher, disputed among colleagues and already played by those less inhibited and who interact more easily. We notice that L.H. seeks to broaden his ability to speak and behave as he tries to assume the teaching role. The role of the teacher is challenging for him, propelling him to the autonomy and decision-making shown when leaving the room and seeking puppets to fulfill the condition imposed, though not revealed, by A.M. and used only as a pretext to keep him around and dependent on what she should designate. L.H. submits himself to the condition imposed by A.M. because he values the role of the teacher played by the adult and demonstrates feeling happy and empowered to do so.

> [...] this means that the child sees the adult, above all, from the perspective of their functions. They want to act as an adult, [...] and under this very general desire, first suggested by the adult (the educator or the parents), they begin to act as if they were the adult. This feeling is so encompassing that a small allusion is enough for the child to transform joyfully into an adult, of course in a purely emotional aspect. It is the strength of this sensation that explains the ease with which children assume the roles of adults. (Elkonin, 2009, p. 404)

Even before being allowed to play teacher, L.H. starts acting as one because when he returns with "some things", he brings puppets, pedagogical material widely used during preschool classes for storytelling.

The child manifestations present in the described game reveal the aspect of arbitrary behavior, that is, the performance of actions consistent with the assumed role. They also refer to the morality issues in the action, that is, an incipient evaluation of the reliability of actions in relation to the similarity with the model begins to take place, according to which these actions will or will not be allowed. However, even though this verification is very weak, "[...] the value of the game is originating this function. This is precisely why the game can be considered a school of arbitrary conduct" (Elkonin, 2009, p. 420).

These considerations reveal the idea that, during role-plays, children learn to control each other, exert some kind of power, discriminate, and thus form preconceptions about what is authorized and unauthorized, right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, among others.

> Role-playing [...] enables the child to overcome the level of consciousness limited to the immediate present, that is, allows the abstract (theoretical) activity. Thus, the target of their actions ceases to be the content of the specific act, moving to the process that articulates various actions and objects, present or symbolized. Consequently, the breadth and complexity of the human world are perceived by children, challenging them [...] and culminating in a complete restructuring of their consciousness. (Martins, 2006, p. 42-43)

The game under review — "Can I be a teacher?" — suggests a power relationship between those who authorize or disallow the adult roles to be played, and therefore, have the control over both social relations that adults develop and the relationships between the children participating in the game. In this case, the girl A.M. demonstrates to have this control, and the boy L.H. feels motivated to reach it when he challenges himself to be the teacher.

Human power corresponds to the ways of being, acting, thinking, and feeling as products of the sociocultural life activity, developed as a possibility of action and as a guiding activity in the environment, with the purpose of satisfying the needs of the subject. Thus, mastering oneself and the knowledge of the world where one lives is an expression of power (Marino Filho, 2010).

When the child needs to play a certain role in the game, the possibility of a special activity that promotes their development arises. Therefore, role-playing allows the emergence of new needs, which lead the subject to want to interpret new roles, experiencing different forms of power. Consequently, the child begins to experience the sensation of being able to exert greater influence while playing, feeling the social power of this new role. This power is not natural, but something social relations create in the individual.

By not abandoning the teacher role, A.M. does not want to give up the power it gives her. When L.H. handed her the puppets, A.M. took them with a laconic "Okay!", without interaction, which could reveal her limitation on the mediating role that verbal language would play in negotiations. On the other hand, L.H. also demonstrated the same limitation by not reacting or expressing himself verbally.

During the episodes, we observed that, in the school role-play, the role of the teacher was not portrayed by all students, but only by those who demonstrated mastery of the actions that the role required and had the sympathy of other participants. "It is not enough to acquire a certain power, one must learn to use it in different situations and be able to master the spheres of its performance" (Marino Filho, 2010, p. 267).

Thus, the research procedure design allowed the space and time expansion for role-playing, from the first to the second phase of data collection. When the pedagogical planning enlarged this space, it increased the possibilities of negotiation and personal empowerment, thus providing better conditions for the mediating interaction between the children.

Different psychic processes emerged in the game: aspects of childhood experience that caught the child's attention, who perceived and retained them in memory, expressing them through language, since "the thought function [acts] as a 'reagent' (analogy to chemical processes) for all psychic functions" (Martins, Abrantes e Facci, 2016, p. 24). In this sense, we identified an evolution in the verbal language of the children, throughout the different role-plays observed, which allows us to state that there was thought development.

The last analysis is uniquely marked by the content of the game — drugs — used by the boys Z. and G.B., who played school and at some point started talking about "marijuana".

From the game transcript, we extracted a few lines from Z.: "[marijuana] is 'dugs'", "[it doesn't] do anything", "marijuana is cigarette", "'dug' is money", "they [the bad guys] steal". What Z. said reveals a reality to which children are very early exposed, and that contrasts with the "protected world" that the school seeks to provide for them. These statements refer to the different meanings that Z. attributes to drugs from his social context.

He did not simply say words; he used them to express his conscience and the personal and moral sense he assigned to them. We can notice that the social meanings attributed to the words "marijuana", "drug", and "cigarette" were partially grasped by Z., with the sense that drugs do nothing, they are only used to make cigarettes and a source of money.

Character traits are formed and developed in the relationship between the individual and the environment, that is, only in the community, which institutes the reaction models that are constructed in identical or similar situations. In established social relations, the individual assimilates reaction models guided by norms, rules, customs, moral requirements, etc. specific to the group to which they belong. Therefore, social experience institutes not only circumstance reaction models but also parameters for self-analysis, providing the guiding points by which people conduct their behaviors (Martins, 2006, p. 37).

EXTRAPOLATING THE SCHOOL WALLS

The discussion about drugs between the two boys sheds light on the process of insertion in the sociocultural universe of the community where they live. It reveals

evidence about moral demands and ways of reacting to the circumstances in which these children find themselves. Thus, it points to the importance of the social role of the school, which, although constituted as part of this social fabric, is as a place not only committed to transmitting the culture historically built by humankind but where children, especially from the underprivileged classes, can be welcomed and protected from the harassment of enticers, traffickers, and from current serious social problems.

Therefore, contemporary society must seek ways to cope with the effects of economic, political, and social issues on child development, emphasizing role-playing as one of the means for children to elaborate on these effects. In this sense, we highlight the need for public policies that enable children to be welcomed full-time into the school learning space, listening to them, and providing them more favorable conditions to protect and guide them.

Just as learning guides and stimulates internal developmental processes, role-playing also fosters growth by triggering new needs that drive evolutionary changes.

> [...] children always behave far beyond the usual conduct for their age. They act as if they are older, bigger, stronger, and more capable than they really are. They act or try to act like an adult in relation to the objects and concepts of the adult world, of the human universe. Thus, having the adult behavior as reference [...] [role-playing] contains, in a condensed form, all the tendencies of the child's later development. (Rossler, 2006, p. 60-61)

Experiencing imaginary situations enables a leap in child development and allows them to have a sense of social belonging, one of the strongest needs in human beings. The child starts to behave more maturely, trying to solve the new situation they are experiencing. They have to resolve the contradiction generated by what they want and what they cannot yet accomplish, so they create an imaginary world in which they can meet their needs. Thus, a new relationship arises between the thought situation and the real situation, between the semantic field and the visual field, driving the semantic field.

Finally, role-playing provides "[...] a situation of transition between the child's action with concrete objects and their actions with meanings" (Oliveira, 2011, p. 69). Through social mediation, the child develops their language skills and expands their sign system. Consequently, by using role-playing games, the child appropriates the concrete world of human objects, actively relates to the objects used by adults, develops awareness about the objective world, and establishes a boundary between what they have mastered and what they still cannot control in terms of tasks and actions.

Role-playing broadens the repertoire of those involved, as it favors interaction between colleagues, enabling new appropriations. The relationship is one of reciprocity; in school, new plots become known, and the actions become more complex as the roles are diversified. It is the life that pulsates outside school manifesting itself within the school. "How to enrich the content of the game? The fundamental

source is the ideas children have of the surrounding reality, and if they do not have them, the game cannot be carried out" (Elkonin, 2009, p. 302).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research was based on the concept that HPPs, such as sensation, perception, attention, memory, language, thought, imagination, or affection, are functions of the human being and work together, developing in an articulated manner. However, the complexity of this development process depends on the experience of external practical activities, which entail opportunities for assimilation of the sign systems to which the individual is exposed.

In this regard, among the daily activities performed by children aged five to six years, role-playing is the main one for the process of humanization and cultural appropriation in this age group. These games help them develop their personality and learn to act in the face of things and people, since the actions they perform in their roles both reproduce experienced relationships and structure internal processes, guiding the appropriation of other practical and more autonomous actions.

We found that the movement and experience of relationships provided by role-playing games allow the materialization of the development of functional processes, favor the imagination and the use of signs, and stimulate new needs that drive evolutionary changes. By interacting with the instruments, the child reproduces the social relations that constitute them, that is, by interpreting roles and playing with other children, adults, and toys available in their surroundings, they appropriate the social meaning of human productive activities, which depend on the social conditions in which the subject is inserted and cannot involve an individual in isolation, as they are relational functions.

The analysis of the role-plays revealed that the children used different resources previously assimilated into their experiences. Thus, they broadened their perception of the world, themselves, and others; organized their thoughts; dealt with their affections; and stimulated their ability to imagine and create, among others. Lastly, they enhanced their HPPs and built personal knowledge and meanings about themselves and the world.

In wishing to live what adults live, children imagined themselves in the ZPD, going beyond their real possibilities at the moment, which made them "work" better, that is, be more active as new interactions took place, enabling them to improve their prospective mental development.

Through role-playing, children recognize their abilities and potential, expose their opinions about the society in which they live, demonstrate their feelings and ethical and moral judgments, communicate, and reveal their conscience in the search for humanization. "And this is exactly how functions develop: when the activity demands them, when the activity requires them to come into operation and advance in complexity" (Pasqualini, 2013, p. 89).

In this process, education for this humanizing transformation has the role of collecting cultural elements, aiming to give the individual a specific nature related to the elected historical knowledge. It is a matter of "producing the particular from

the totality". Therefore, it becomes the object of education to "[...] discover the most appropriate ways to achieve this goal" (Saviani, 2013, p. 13).

From this perspective, based on the realization of the educational and HPP development potential through the experience of role-playing in preschool, this research proposes the creation of spaces in the classroom routine for spontaneous child's play, in which role-playing games may emerge. It is noteworthy, therefore, not only the importance of the teacher as a mediator, but the need to understand human development as a central object for the organization of educational processes that really promote and effect the child's development (Szymanski; Colussi, 2018, p. 49). It is the understanding that such games promote learning at the service of developing thought, voluntary attention, logical memory, language, imagination, feelings, among other psychic functions, while also enabling the school to look at what children are, think, and feel.

An important aspect to emphasize is that the preschool teacher's work, regarding the child's psychic development and having role-playing as a leading activity, is to look to the future, the "come to be" of the child's psyche. Consequently, by providing the space and time necessary for role-playing to emerge, the teacher promotes the basic premises for the new period of psychic development, in which study will become the leading activity. In short, playing pretend is not pretending to play.

As the excerpts analyzed show, although role-plays are improvised, they are not a spontaneous activity. They are part of the social repertoire, bringing the history of children, and the basis for the improvement of human attributes and properties because "history can be recovered as a process by its objectification" (Marino Filho, 2007, p. 155). The presented fragments of history go beyond the classroom and lead to further questions about the implications established between the context in which the child lives and their psychic development.

The contemporary child has premature values, information, and experiences, which contribute to naturalize issues historically and socially constructed and confront the image of innocent children proposed by modern ideas. Understanding the process of subjectivity constitution leads to the awareness of why and how social, political, and economic issues, which are assuming increasingly serious proportions, manifest themselves in school.

Being socially constructed, these issues cannot be naturalized, that is, understood as permeating society in a natural process. It is "[...] necessary to investigate the historical-social fabric by which a certain conscience and certain categories or needs are explained". This question reveals that the logic of private profit by increasing exclusion is progressively aggravating social issues and that this relationship is historically produced (Frigotto, 1994, p. 36), which forces us, as historical subjects, to reflect on and assume these problems.

Therefore, while advancing theoretical knowledge about childhood, the issues arising from social discrepancies invade the contemporary child and, consequently, the school, resulting in huge challenges to parents and educators. Symbolically bringing to school the problems and situations experienced by children through role-playing can allow them new ways of looking at these issues, in order to overcome the trivialization of daily life.

And if social reality is historically produced, it is our responsibility, as parents and educators, to be protagonists of this history and strive for public policies that give children, especially those from lower classes, the possibility of extending their stay in school full-time, expanding the alternatives to protect them, even partially, from the early experience of situations of violence that manifest in their wider social context.

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