



The child, children’s cultures and the broad sense of the term ‘play’

A criança, as culturas infantis e o amplo sentido do termo “brincadeira”

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Abstract

This paper presents concepts and proposes reflections on the relationship between children’s everyday play at school, produced during recess time, and the social dynamic elements that contextualize children’s culture. Meanings of the terms game, toy and play are analyzed and contrasted considering the playful action that ensues from the experience of the child who plays. Drawing from Fernandes’ studies (2004), this paper indicates forms of socialization involved during children groups’ playful activities, the role of cultural

transmission in play and the creative dimension of playing that makes children agents of their own socialization and producers of their own culture.

Keywords: Child. Children's culture. Play.

Resumo

Este texto apresenta conceitos e propõe reflexões sobre a relação entre as brincadeiras infantis produzidas no cotidiano da escola, em momentos de recreio, e os elementos sociodinâmicos que contextualizam a cultura das crianças. Os significados dos termos jogo, brinquedo e brincadeira são analisados e contrastados, tendo em vista a ação lúdica produzida pela experiência da criança que brinca. Com base nos estudos de Florestan Fernandes (2004), são assinaladas as formas de socialização implicadas na atividade lúdica dos grupos infantis, a função de transmissão cultural exercida pelas brincadeiras e a dimensão criativa do brincar, que faz das crianças agentes de sua socialização e produtoras de culturas infantis.

Palavras-chave: Criança. Cultura infantil. Brincadeira.

Introduction

In interactions between children's play and the social life flow, it is found a knowledge domain that is produced especially by children's actions. Children's playful heritage can be understood as a formative institution composed of various socializing influences that mobilize knowledge with social significance (FERNANDES, 2004). However, in addition to acquiring this social significance knowledge, children can also be considered agents of their formulation (CORSARO, 2009). Their own intelligibility modes (SARMENTO, 2004) and their generational membership make some aspects of their symbolic production not only characterized by the reproduction of older generations' cultural heritage, but also

differentiated from those inherent in adults' culture, giving rise to what we call *children's culture*.

Here is a significant fact of school life: children produce culture not only by assimilating the experience with adults, but also from the relationships established amongst them, in the group intimacy of which they are part. This share of school culture — created and inherent in 'socio-cultural demand' (FORQUIN, 1993, p. 169) — and which comes from children, impacts school's everyday life in that it exerts a force that transcends recess time or free play time in which children can play. The bonds of affection, disputes and passions lived by children invade classes, permeate their relationships with school professionals and reach their homes. These motivations are fuel for their production and their development.

In the relationships that children establish among themselves, it is irrevocably confirmed a way of being and acting upon the world: play. This is a key fundamental element that characterizes the specificity of children's cultures, one that is constituted as an intrinsic central factor to the very idea of childhood (SARMENTO, 2002). The act of playing always presents itself based on certain kind of play, loosely or tightly structured. The point is that play is precisely defined as taking heed of conventions, parameters or rules by which play is structured around. This can be observed in different situations: when a child plays with a toy like a puzzle; when participating in a play composed by explicit rules, as hand games¹; when carrying a symbolic game consisting of hidden rules (VYGOTSKY, 1991), as playing at mother.

A significant share of conventions, parameters and rules is originated from adult social life and it is assimilated by children who exercise them, questioning them and adapting them to their various conditions

¹ Hand games are among children's favorite, especially girls. They are executed in pairs or in circles and are basically structured from nursery rhymes which metrical pattern demarcates the hand choreography that touch one another. 'Hand games practiced by children in the schoolyard are structured by the children themselves, acquiring characteristics that reflect their own interests and abilities' (SOUZA, 2009, p. 75).

and their interests. Play is a powerful tool for real world assimilation, as they suggest the most varied interaction situations and meaning, constituting a 'space of socialization, a domain of relations with the other, of culture appropriation, decision making practice and invention' (BROUGÈRE, 2006, p. 103). They exert considerable influence on the constitution of the child's mental representations and provide key components for his/her development.

In early childhood², play is the most vivid evidence of behavior change that occurs when the baby can slowly find or assign meaning to things, people and events. Given the maturing possibilities of its psychological and motor apparatus, play is configured as an activity that can regulate behavior. When the child begins to operate the meanings that play assumes, a new world is introduced. Drawing on an inevitably close relationship between imagination and perception of play rules (VYGOTSKY, 1991), the child not only develops his/her way of playing but also outlines his/her way of living.

In this context, the school appears as a privileged space in which the child has the opportunity to share the experience of playing with individuals who belong to the same age and have the same *centers of interest*³ (FERNANDES, 2004). The school is characterized as a space

² *Early childhood* includes 0-5 year old age range. This term is used by the Sociology of childhood for instance in Plaisance's studies (2004). 'In recent developments affecting the developed industrial countries, children's schooling before the mandatory age grew to the point that in international organizations the very ambiguous notion of 'pre-school' was replaced by the most general term 'early childhood education'' (Plaisance, 2004, p. 222).

³ We believe that these centers of interest vary depending on each individual and group. They can be guided by broader and deeper motivations, motivations that help make up children's imaginary framework, determining their way of playing and being. Fernandes (2004, p. 21) speaks in centers of interest in the following way: 'Temper and center of interest disparity, combined with the lack of maturity in ego compulsion, could produce the equivalent of anarchy. However, the adjustments tend to the composition and integration of personal dispositions to act, without being able to identify special repressive mechanisms. It seems clear that the egalitarian structure of children's groups is responsible for this form of equilibrium, which determines the remaining terms of children's social life. The choice of centers of interest and variable goals on the basis of consensus creates an undifferentiated social force but with enormous coercive power'. It cannot be confused

that goes beyond the established knowledge transmission; it is a place of culture production. In the relationships that children's groups establish among their members, numerous rules of interaction are tried and invented. While they play, children maintain close relations with the reality around them, but also install particular realities, convenient to their ways of playing.

Play and its supporters: concepts and reflections

This study demonstrates special interest in the term *traditional play*. It uses important references obtained in the observation of this kind of play. That's because in traditional play there is a unique way by which *sociodynamic influences* can be constructed and transmitted by a socio-dynamic process, through continuous effort of children and adults from different generations. To its existence there is no need of a program, a project or an educational intervention. Traditional play is part of popular culture and 'fulfill a social function', as Fernandes (2004) defined it, or 'fill the dynamics of social life', as Kishimoto (1993) wrote. This is the point that matters the most in this research: play in face of the *socializing influences*⁴ of play. Therefore, we emphasize here the universe of traditional play, making it necessary to better define this term.

In referring to traditional play, Fernandes (2004) often employs the term *infant folk revelry*; while Kishimoto (1993) adopts *infant's traditional game*. Educators, in general, use the term play, but, due to the recent access to numerous educational materials and CDs that compile these plays, they also make use of the term *toy*, not referring only to the physical object, but to play itself, as in the case of the *singing toys*.

with the *centers of interest* as they were named in the 1930's by Decroly, from Dewey's ideas, and whose meaning is another, associated with the didactic strategy to provoke in the group of children the interest in certain subjects (KISHIMOTO, 1993).

⁴ Term used by Florestan Fernandes (2004).

Due to the intrinsic issues in text translation process and concepts, in Vygotsky's work (1991), in Portuguese, the term *toy* appears more generally, as a form of human activity that distinguishes itself – from work, for example. Also as a result of translator's choices, the terms used reveal a representation effort of what rests on the authors' concepts.

The terminologies assigned to play are varied and sometimes confused. It is possible, however, establish three distinct inherent traits to child play activity. These traits can be understood as forms of organizing the play and show differences that can be viewed based on the definitions of the terms *toy*, *game* and *play*. To Brougère (2006), *toy* is a support for play. This idea reminds us of the importance of the object materiality, on which the child rises or falls; the child picks, launches or captures; with which the child creates scenarios, dramatization and plays. A doll, a stroller, a ball or a tree branch or even a song can be a support for play. The *toy* also carries with itself a range of social meanings that lead the activity to certain directions. The term *game* can be understood as that activity which follows a more defined structure of rules, a more or less rigid sequence of steps, a logic that repeats itself. Hopscotch, Dodge Ball⁵, Hide and Seek, are activities through its rules outline playful action. Thus, we can understand the game as well as the toy, fulfilling the function of being a support for the game to happen, since its structure guides the activity, even if it is not composed by the object materiality, just as toys are.

And what does the term *play* refer to? Play is hereby understood as the playful activity itself, the comprehensive action that can find in a game or toy a support to be developed. However play may go beyond the support, converting itself into an experience that penetrates the imaginary, becomes in improvisation, adheres to what it cannot be named, to passion, to art. Thus, when finding a ball (the toy), a group of children can practice Dodge Ball (the game). Yet play (playful action) is what will

⁵ Dodge Ball is a sports game, played in a court, resulting in a competition in which two teams face each other. A line divides the teams. Participants toss a ball to hit the opponent on the other side of the court, causing his/her exclusion. The winner is the first to eliminate all opponents.

enable both the toy and the game to be reevaluated so that if the kids want they can change the course of the activity and adjust the playful conditions to their most intimate interests. The ball can turn into a bomb and the Dodge Ball game may become a battleground in which space begin to sprout dramatic elements, characters, new rules, new goals, more elusive fruits of creative improvisation (SPRÉA, 2010).

In this example, the play that arises is organized based on the rules of Dodge Ball, a game that can be considered a traditional or folk activity. The object of this reflection is not the game, but the characters of play. And it is in the children's playful action that lies the concern of this study — and this action will be named here only as *play*.

There is no way to play without standing before a more or less structured playful proposal. Although it is improvised, during the creative process a minimum structure will emerge. Even if that play arises from the most immediate and unforeseen motivation, as turning into Spider-Man during lunch and eat a lot to stay strong, still the conditions of play are quickly defined, their sequences, reasons and social-affective connections. Playing does not depend exclusively on toy, nor it originates only in activities that are configured in the form of folk revelry or traditional game. These two terms thus acquire a more restricted sense, as they relate to activities with a structure previously considered, which may be manifested relatively easily even before the beginning of play. In this case, the statement will be the same or at least similar, in several circumstances in which the activity can be found, as who plays "*Escravos de Jó*", in the south or in north-eastern of Brazil, yesterday or fifty years ago, basically follows the same rules⁶. This aspect helps to characterize the elements of a very playful tradition of children's cultures.

⁶ We had the opportunity to compare the way of performing this game in several Brazilian contexts, always finding local peculiarities, rhythmic and melodic variations, differences in the texts and choreography, as in the case of the comparison between the way of playing in Campo Largo - PR and Uruçuaia - MG. In this case, despite the variations, the core idea of the game remains the same.

Thus, the term *play* is characterized by being more comprehensive, being all the activity that takes place while it is possible to play. The terms *game* and *folk revelry*, on the other hand, condition their definition to a more defined rule structure. Although they cannot be confused with the term *toy*, as this refers to the materiality of an object, they can be defined as a support for play, centered on a basic sequence and an idea of perpetuation and transmission over a given time. The term *play* in this sense now includes everything that is invented as one plays. It is about both what is done during the execution of traditional game or traditional revelry, that here all will be treated as *traditional play*, and what is done with objects or things that can be called toys, and also what can be done at make-believe activities, like playing house, mother and child, teacher, or anything else which is desired.

Play here is understood as the result of children's action on personal motivations and social situations that involve them. If at a school space, especially during recess, distinct modes of playing coexist, if there is in them a rich repertoire of play to be identified, if trends and preferences are confronted, everything may help illustrate the discussion. However, it is the collective interaction and ways to create and conduct the play that underlies the focus of the present discussion.

Creative dimension and socializing forces of play

When playing, the child uses multiple references, including those located immediately around him/her, and adapts them to his/her skills and interests. The child's behavior obeys the parameters already guided by his/her life history and also the conventions that emerge from interaction with others. In the relationship that the child establishes with others and with objects, he/she assimilates notions that are significant in his/her experience, based on these, children produce new meanings and reorder the sense of reality that is within their reach (SPRÉA, 2010). To deepen reflection on the creative dimension and at the same time on the

sociodynamic of play, it is appropriate to consider Vygotsky's idea (1991), which he developed on the intersection between rules of play and child's imagination. To Vygotsky the role of motivation on the toy is substantial to understand its nature:

At the beginning of pre-school age, when desires that cannot be immediately satisfied or forgotten arise and the previous stage characteristic of an immediate satisfaction tendency of these desires still remains, the child's behavior changes. To resolve this tension, the child at preschool age becomes involved in an illusory and imaginary world where the unrealizable desires can be realized, and this world is what we call play (VYGOTSKY, 1991, p. 106).

The one who creates this world is the one who plays and to play he/she experiences a part of what he/she believes to be possible to accomplish. Driven by the need to satisfy a desire, the one who plays may both temporarily satisfy oneself or be frustrated in the face of not achieving the desired objective, whatever imaginary situation is undertaken. This dual function that the play acquires, which both satisfies and frustrates for the one who is engaged, is characterized as one of the most basic socializing influences of playing (SPRÉA, 2010). The ambiguous emotional atmosphere in which every human being is founded, which oscillates between the temporary satisfaction and frustration, is nothing more than the very central motivation that puts life in movement. This takes place not only during play, but also in all areas of human action.

Contrary to what it is stated in many texts produced on playing, play is not justified only by the recreation or pleasure. Even if it may be linked cheerfully to these concerns, its socio-dynamic influence goes beyond the playfulness and reaches the complexity of social life in which the one who plays is immersed. Thus, according to Vygotsky,

[...] define play as an activity that gives pleasure to the child is incorrect for two reasons. Firstly, many activities provide children with experiences of pleasure much more intense than the play, such as

pacifiers, even if the child is not satiated. And secondly, there are games in which the activity itself is not pleasant, such as, predominantly at the end of preschool, games that only give pleasure to the child if he/she finds the result interesting (VYGOTSKY, 1991, p. 105).

Playing is sustained in part by a need, an urgency of satisfying a desire. Inasmuch as the child grows, this immediacy to satisfy him/herself is replaced by a new form of self-management, self-control without loss of enthusiasm, but it allows the child to engage in more sophisticated play. What happens is that play acquires a more complex profile, structuring themselves under more explicit and precise rules.

The rules appear as the fundamental basis of play. Even if a playful activity is free and improvised or imaginary and unrealistic, there are presupposed rules at work in play, which may be explicit (structural rules of play) or hidden (rules that constrain certain behaviors).

Given these rules, the child is faced with certain real objectivities and operates meanings that have direct correlation with regulatory social standards of his/her behavior. This is one more elementary data that represents the experience of play as an activity necessarily guided by socializing forces, because

[...] there is no play without rules. The imaginary situation of any kind of play already contains rules of behavior, although it may not be a game with formal rules previously established. The child imagines herself as a mother and the doll as a child and thus she must obey the rules of maternal behavior (VYGOTSKY, 1991, p. 108).

In an imaginary situation, the child necessarily is faced with the rules that the situation evokes. When playing “mom” the child tries to be what she or he judges compatible with the idea of maternal behavior. There are also situations created from a fantasy that print even stronger traces of reality to the game. These are the cases when children play what they in fact are, for instance, when they say “let’s play student”, or “let’s

play at father and child”, when suggesting that the father assumes his own role.

To Vygotsky (1991), the act of playing being the other or playing what the child actually believes he/she is induces the child to behavioral rule assimilation. Unlike what occurs when the child behaves without thinking about the role he/she assumes, in imaginary situations he/she cares to display his/her attitudes just like the corresponding social situation. That is because, “[...] what in real life goes unnoticed by the child it becomes a behavior rule when playing” (VYGOTSKY, 1991, p. 108).

The experience of play requires certain physical and intellectual efforts that test the child's skills and abilities. When playing he/she will always be faced with something new. But the new — here understood based on the assumption that during the games it is necessary to imagine or create — is always imposed from preset references. As Vygotsky (1991) shows, it is in the similarity between concepts that the child has already acquired and those that the imagined situation proposes that the rule assimilation appears as one of the results of the game. Learning arises from an inventive action, but it is structured on concepts remodeling caused by the shock between what happens in the current experience and the concepts acquired from previous experiences.

This socio-dynamic scenario may be verified in children's actions during school recess while the play. Boys and girls take on different roles, constantly going in and out of various imaginary situations in which rules are produced from their similarity to their real conditions of existence. As they are mostly collective, the common play at school recess promotes an intense exchange of information. They are realized by several people at the same time, that is to happen it is necessary for a child to help another. In this sense, what the child can do with the help of others is at the forefront and acquires fundamental importance. This evidence, as stated by Vygotsky (1991), is little privileged in the field of educational practice today:

For over a decade, even the most astute thinkers never questioned this fact; they never considered the notion that what the child does with the help of others could be, somehow, much more indicative of his/her development than what they can do alone (VYGOTSKY, 1991, p. 96).

The relation between teaching and learning that children establish in the context of children's groupings goes beyond the limits of recreation. In a group, as explained by Fernandes (2004, p. 19), 'behavioral pattern learning and social norms develops in line with the learning of corresponding sanctions'. This means that, while a group creates its rules of coexistence, it establishes a way of enforcing these rules.

The rules built within the infant groups are obviously taken in similarity with the rules of the social environment in which these groups inhabit. However, if on the one hand 'the child learns to shape his/her behavior by prevailing action models in the global society' (FERNANDES, 2004, p. 19), on the other he/she adapts these models to the dimensions of his/her microcosm, producing new rules. In this sense, learning can also be understood as a cultural construction in which

[...] the child's master is the child him/herself. The models sometimes are taken or imitated from adults. But everything goes through and to the kids - they become the agents and the human arbiters of what is 'right' or 'wrong', what 'has to be' or 'has not to be' done. In other words, the activities developed in infant groups include behavioral norm or standard incorporation in the child's personality. Through direct and concrete experience, the child learns 'how to' act in a given circumstance, as a partner and member of a given social time grouping. The important thing here is not only the behavioral pattern inculcation. Other things simultaneously occur. Along with what his companions 'expect' from him/her, the child learns 'how' the group reacts to its own expressed behavior. The child ends up distinguishing various types of group reaction and estimating pleasant or unpleasant consequences they entail (FERNANDES, 2004, p. 18).

A child's play can gather numerous languages, such as oral, musical, graphic-pictorial, plastic and movement (GARANHANI, 2004). However, given the knowledge that each language holds, it can produce the child's contact with numerous values and institutions of society in a symbolic way. For example, when playing with a nursery rhyme, such as *A Canoa Virou*, where participants are faced with the musical, choreographic and literary aspects of the game, while dealing with issues such as choosing a mate, waiting for their turn, and cooperating to ensure that the circle goes round without breaking apart. In addition, participants of play make decisions and find ways to resolve the conflicts that inevitably emanate from any relationship between the members of a group and between the group and the institution to which they are connected. These are the social forces that span the boundaries of that intrinsic knowledge to literary, musical, scenic and sport game structures, inserting experience within a delimited social space. In this space, participants learn not only about the game itself, but also to behave before the collectivity.

Folklore, however, does not only cover the cultural objectifications of literary nature, as the texts of myths or rhymes. It also comprehends the cultural objectifications of institutional nature, that organize and socially guide human activities such as rite or 'trocinhas'⁷. Here, the notion of infant folklore is inclusive, therein it should be understood both children's traditional *revelry* and forms of social aggregation that they presuppose (FERNANDES, 2004, p. 16).

These forms of social aggregation lead children towards different possibilities of interaction with the social environment. In children's group, the symmetries of age, size and intelligibility that children share as they belong to the same generation amplify the socializing experience, in that through playing,

⁷ Common term used to refer to groups of neighboring children who used to play in the streets in the 1940s, a time when Fernandes (2004) conducted his study in the suburb of Bom Retiro, in São Paulo.

[...] children have the opportunity to maintain personal contacts and to interact socially with other people from the same *social category*. This means, in other words, that the child may develop, through them, relationships with people who have approximately the same age, the same *centers of interest*, the same world conception and the same social prestige. Therefore he/she can be embedded in a social world in which social relations are no longer inherently and inevitably asymmetric, as it occurs with adults' coexistence - parents, neighbors, teachers etc. (FERNANDES, 2004, p. 16, emphasis added).

The child learns to guide him/herself through mediated collectivity both by what one expects from them and what he/she expects from the group. The social interaction caused by the dynamics that playing suggests places the child in a social atmosphere in which his/her subjectivity forces clash with the forces that guide the collective experience. An individual's integration with a particular group depends on this game of forces whose rules are inexorably established by the culture in which the group is grounded.

Play positions children's enthusiasm in a complex network of meanings in which mediation and social control are marked by enjoyment. In order to achieve enjoyment it is necessary that the players meet certain agreements, respect some rules and perform certain actions, without which it would not be possible to play. Therefore any collective game presupposes an agreement of coexistence among the ones who play. In search for the promised enjoyment, numerous efforts are undertaken. In this exercise, the child becomes aware of certain capabilities that can only be proved through the challenges suggested by play.

Through folk revelry the child not only 'learns something' but also acquires a socializing experience of complex significance to the development of his/her personality. Folklore is not mere source of recreation for children or for adults. The fun carries the measure of man: it also elevates to the sphere of consciousness or action plan certain vital distinctions to human behavior (FERNANDES, 2004, p. 232).

Although it is possible to establish significant differences between the types of interaction promoted by different types of play it can be said that 'it is not the game itself that fosters moral conscience. This emerges and intensifies through the social situation involved in the game' (FERNANDES, 2004, p. 18). In *social situations of coexistence* caused by the practice of play and in their respective forms of *social aggregation*, socializing influences of children's folklore are expressed. If, on the one hand 'certain socio-dynamic effects of the primary group are universal' (FERNANDES, 2004, p. 15), on the other hand the expressed ways of cooperating or competing in games maintain compatibility with regulator social motives of children's behavior. In other words, this means that the existence and the predominance of this or that type of play in a particular context is also explained by the compatibility it has with forms of social regulation expressed by this context. Fernandes (2004) sees this evidence in 1941, when, through his empirical material, he verifies the need to expand the field of work, from the study of children's folklore to children's groups of *trocinhas*. At that moment, to him:

The simple knowledge of the internal development mechanism of folkloric facts, from the exclusive point of view of folklore, proved to be incomplete, and thus the analysis of cultural content led naturally to the study of corresponding social forms (FERNANDES, 2004, p. 200).

This finding reflects the criteria adopted in this study; where the instances of play observed within educational institutions were understood as playful actions that flourish within a complex social order present at school environments. In some cases it was necessary to understand the compatibility between the social situation experienced during play and what the school deems appropriate in terms of coexistence. In this sense, it was found that the forms of social aggregation contained in a determined play are generally reasonably compatible with a certain guiding point of view of the social behavior in the school environment. This explains the durability of certain games that are better connected to social

expectations and standards of the school social context own behavior. This explains the durability of certain plays that are better connected to social expectations and behavioral standards of the school social context.

At this point, the sociological analysis helps to understand what is behind the decline in the practice of certain traditional play. If there is no compatibility between certain aspects of the school culture and children's cultures, then the first outweighs the second – that declines it. Those plays that are more accepted precisely because they are more compatible with certain social expectations remain. This explains, in part, some school resistance in relation to play as ‘cops and robbers’, which in some institutions is prohibited. It also explains why Soccer and Dodge Ball are so encouraged (SPRÉA, 2010).

However this evident compatibility cannot be taken at face value of these findings; for not only the most explicit factors, such as the pedagogical factors, determine the selection of play. The school routine is run by a network of forces manifested by those who live in it. There are substantial aspects that get in the way of pedagogical rationale and are motivated by other regulatory impulses of social interaction:

The culture, when opposing the administrative, educational, unifying and legal rationality, reveals the invisible, the real in construction, thus contributing to the demystification of the existence of a single, unifying school (MAFRA, 2003, p. 124).

Even with certain guidelines or some control of the school, numerous less official forms of interaction can be perpetuated. There is, indeed, a number of continuous forces that, despite appearing in the personal motivations of students and school professionals, is best marked in different confronting cultures within the school, marking the constitutive identity of groups that inhabit it.

In children's play at school, is it observed, then, a complex process of cultural production, which involves the transmission and creation of meanings and the creation of senses. These are special meanings

attributed by the children to the functions they perform within their play, as their forms of intelligibility and representation of life are also special. It arises there the possibility of locating in the children's actions very peculiar modes of social relation production and meaning of things. These modes give rise to a dynamic system of meanings that belong to the playful childhood nature. Given the immense diversity of social contexts in which children's groups are located and on which they depend, this system can be called *children's cultures*, always in the plural.

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