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Ludic-aggressive play in Early Childhood Education: child and adult logic in dispute

Brincadeiras lúdico-agressivas na Educação Infantil: lógicas infantis e adultas em disputa

Juegos lúdico-agresivos en la Educación Infantil: lógicas infantiles y adultas em disputa

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Abstract

This study analyses the representations of adults and children regarding ludic-aggressive play in Early Childhood Education, considering it a fundamental practice for socialization processes and the development of children's cultures. The ethnographic research was conducted in a Municipal Early Childhood Education Center (CMEI) in Vitória, Brazil, with data generated through narratives, interviews, videos, and field diary records. Participants included two Physical Education teachers, 40 children aged 4 and 5, a secretary, a pedagogue, and the school principal. The analysis identified three main categories: (in)safety in play, perception, and recording of reality. The findings showed that the teachers' representations reflected a culture of care, initially grounded in a traditional perspective, which gradually evolved into a more understanding and tolerant approach as they recognized the importance of play for learning and social interactions. The results highlight that, in alignment with the guiding axes of the Early Childhood Education curriculum, ludic-aggressive play fosters the development of socio-emotional skills, coexistence with differences, and expression through multiple languages. This study

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emphasizes the importance of valuing these practices in pedagogical planning, recognizing children's agency and playfulness as essential elements of education.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education. Physical Education. Rough-and-tumble play. Play fighting. Ludic-aggressive play. Children's cultures.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa representações de adultos e crianças sobre brincadeiras lúdico-agressivas no cotidiano da Educação Infantil, considerando-as como práticas fundamentais para os processos de socialização e a produção de culturas infantis. A pesquisa, de caráter etnográfico, foi realizada em um Centro Municipal de Educação Infantil (CMEI) em Vitória/ES, com dados gerados por meio de narrativas, entrevistas, vídeos e registros em diário de campo. Os participantes incluíram duas professoras de Educação Física, 40 crianças de 4 e 5 anos, uma secretária, uma pedagoga e o diretor da escola. A análise revelou três categorias principais: (in)segurança na brincadeira, percepção e registro da realidade. Observou-se que as representações das professoras refletiam uma cultura de cuidado, marcada por um discurso tradicional, mas que evoluiu para uma abordagem mais compreensiva e tolerante, ao reconhecer a importância das brincadeiras para a aprendizagem e o convívio social. Os resultados destacam que, em consonância com os eixos norteadores do currículo da Educação Infantil, as brincadeiras lúdico-agressivas favorecem o desenvolvimento de competências socioemocionais, a convivência com as diferenças e a expressão por múltiplas linguagens. O estudo reforça a necessidade de valorizar essas práticas no planejamento pedagógico, reconhecendo o protagonismo infantil e a ludicidade como elementos essenciais da educação.

Palavras-chave: Educação Infantil. Educação Física. Brincadeiras de luta. Brincadeiras lúdico-agressivas. Culturas infantis.

Resumen

Este estudio analiza representaciones de adultos y niños sobre los juegos lúdico-agresivos en la Educación Infantil, considerándolos fundamentales para los procesos de socialización y la producción de culturas infantiles. La investigación, de enfoque etnográfico, se realizó en un Centro Municipal de Educación Infantil (CMEI) en Vitória/ES, con datos generados a través de narraciones, entrevistas, videos y registros en el diario de campo. Participaron dos profesoras de Educación Física, 40 niños de 4 y 5 años, una secretaria, una pedagoga y el director de la escuela. El análisis identificó tres categorías principales: (in)seguridad en el juego, percepción y registro de la realidad. Las representaciones de las profesoras reflejaron una cultura de cuidado, basada en un discurso tradicional, pero que evolucionó hacia un enfoque más comprensivo, reconociendo la importancia de los juegos para el aprendizaje y la convivencia social. Los resultados destacan que los juegos lúdico-agresivos favorecen el desarrollo de competencias socioemocionales, la convivencia con las diferencias y la expresión a través de múltiples lenguajes. En línea con los principios del currículo de la Educación Infantil, el estudio resalta la necesidad de valorar estas prácticas en la planificación pedagógica, reconociendo el protagonismo infantil y la ludicidad como elementos esenciales de la educación.

Palabras clave: Educación Infantil. Educación Física. Juego de lucha. Juego lúdico-agresivo. Culturas infantiles.

Introduction

“Observe, just observe, for the child herself will teach you.”
(Froebel *apud* Cole, 1907, p. 26)

Attentive listening and sensitive observation of children in their play contexts invite us to rethink and recognize the knowledge that emerges from children's playful actions. Drawing from Froebel's epigraph and grounded in the principles of the Sociology of Childhood, it is understood that the child is an active subject in their learning process and a producer of culture. Observing their interactions, inventions, and ways of playing offers a pathway to access their unique forms of meaning-making.

In the timespaces¹ of Early Childhood Education—especially during Physical Education and recess—children develop social dynamics based on their experiences and creativity, creating their own game rules, negotiating roles, and resolving conflicts autonomously. Play is understood as an essential dimension of childhood, functioning as a language through which children construct meaning, express subjectivity, and actively participate in the cultures they produce. Sarmento (2007) highlights the importance of recognizing children's diverse experiences, shaped by distinct historical, geographical, social, and cultural contexts, as well as their protagonism in producing their own stories and knowledge.

In this sense, play is not only a guaranteed right but also a legitimate way of inhabiting the world, expressing desires, and interacting with others. When observing children's play in the school setting, it is noted a plurality of play forms are noted that include symbolic and physical confrontations. Some of these play activities—often marginalized or repressed by adults—are marked by elements such as excitement, challenge, power, aggression, and even nonsense.

To name these manifestations, this article proposes the concept of ludic-aggressive play, understood as practices that combine, ambiguously and creatively, elements of playfulness, symbolic aggression, and nonsense. This proposal aligns with national and international studies that describe similar forms of play fighting, such as rough-and-tumble play, understood as social games involving wrestling, chasing, and mock combat—vigorous actions like kicking, punching, and pushing—which occur in cooperative and playful contexts (Carlson, 2011; Farias & Wiggers, 2019; Smith & StGeorge, 2023; Veiga, Rebocho & Pomar, 2025). By bringing these perspectives together, it becomes evident that such forms of play, although they may appear aggressive, represent fundamental experiences for children's social, emotional, and physical development, enabling them to explore boundaries, assume roles, and express emotions in a safe environment of symbolic negotiation among peers.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that this is an interpretive category created by adults and therefore subject to criticism for adultcentrism. Children do not refer to their play as “ludic-aggressive”; they often call it “little fights” or “play fighting,” as observed in the field reports. The construction of this concept stems from an analytical need to give visibility to children's expressions that are often disallowed in schools, challenging the normative boundaries between play and real fighting (Smith & StGeorge, 2023).

The aggressiveness present in these games should not be interpreted as synonymous with violence, but rather as a symbolic and creative expression, mobilized through the process of invention and negotiation among peers. Sutton-Smith (1997) argues that play is characterized by ambiguity, oscillating between pleasure, risk, imagination, and power. It is within this space of ambivalence that ludic-aggressive play emerges, revealing how children explore the limits of the body, rules, and social relationships through intense physical performances that are often unsettling to the adult gaze.

In dialogue with Brougère (1998), who values play culture as a social construct, such games are seen as legitimate forms of cultural participation and learning. The presence of nonsense in these interactions

¹ *Timespaces (espaçostempos)* are understood as a single, mutually connected term, forming a meaningful whole and drawing an analogy with the weavings that are (re)constructed and (dis)articulated in the dialogues produced in the everyday lives lived with and among children in Early Childhood Education.

reveals the children's creative disorder, their cleverness, and the inversion of adult logic, as already suggested by Manoel de Barros (2003) in his call to “unsee the world.”

Analysing ludic-aggressive play that emerges in school contexts, especially in Early Childhood Education, allows us to understand not only children's ways of expressing themselves and socializing, but also the symbolic disputes present in educational spaces. According to Pinto and Sarmiento (1997, p. 8), “interpreting the social representations of children can serve not only as a means to access childhood as a social category but also as a way to reveal the structures and dynamics of society embedded in children's discourse.” From this perspective, childhood is understood as a producer of meaning and culture, and not merely as a preparatory stage for adult life.

Chartier (2002) expands on this reflection by highlighting that the representations produced in school settings are shaped by symbolic disputes, competition, and power dynamics. For the author, “representation struggles are as important as economic struggles for understanding the mechanisms by which a group imposes—or attempts to impose—its conception of the social world, its values, and its domain” (Chartier, 2002, p. 17). Fairclough (2003), in turn, contributes by affirming that social representations are not limited to what is explicitly stated, but also encompass what is implicit, presupposing specific forms of authority, doubt, or certainty—what he calls modality.

Building on these contributions, this study aims to analyse the representations of adults and children concerning ludic-aggressive play in Early Childhood Education, understanding these practices as meaningful and contested in the symbolic realm. It is of interest in reflecting on how such play reveals different logics—those of children and those of adults—and how these logics come into conflict within the school institution, especially in the timespaces of Physical Education and recess. As Chartier (2002, p. 17) reminds us, it is through representations that the present gains meaning, the other becomes intelligible, and space becomes legible. In this sense, we ask: if play is a recognized right of childhood, why are ludic-aggressive games so often repressed or delegitimized? And how are these practices perceived by the various actors in the school environment?

This article seeks to discuss how ludic-aggressive play contributes to the production of children's cultures, based on the social representations of both children and adults. By problematizing the concept coined in this study, which aims to reflect on its strengths and limitations, as well as analyse the effects of children's interactions in Early Childhood Education, particularly during moments of Physical Education and recess. This study works from the hypothesis that these games, far from simply expressing deviance or violence, reveal unique ways of existing, socializing, and making sense of the world in childhood.

Methodology

This ethnographic study² focused on the *timespaces* of Physical Education and recess at a Municipal Early Childhood Education Center (CMEI) located in a lower-middle-class community in the city of Vitória, Espírito Santo, Brazil. The participants included two Physical Education teachers (PEFI and PEFII), 40 children aged 4 and 5 from Early Childhood Education, as well as a school secretary, a pedagogue, and the school principal.

The ethnographic approach enabled a “deep immersion in the field” (Alves, 2008), based on “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1989) and on the building of relationships with both children and adults, recognizing their “cultural productions” (Sarmiento, 2007; Corsaro, 2011). Continuous presence in the field made it possible to observe, record, and interpret the meanings of play, especially those involving ludic-aggressive elements.

² This doctoral research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Espírito Santo – Goiabeira Campus, under CAAE number 58544216.3.0000.5542 and approval report number 1.936.658, following the requirements established by Resolution No. 466/2012 of the Brazilian National Health Council (CNS).

As this was an ethnographic study conducted in an Early Childhood Education institution, ethical considerations were grounded in respect for children's dignity, autonomy, and rights as social subjects and producers of culture (Sarmiento, 2007). The study was first approved by a Research Ethics Committee and included institutional authorization from the school, along with signed Informed Consent Forms (ICF) from the children's legal guardians. Additionally, the children themselves were actively involved through the method of "reactive entry" into the field (Corsaro, 2011), using accessible language in dialogues, encouraging responses to the researcher, and receiving immediate feedback from them regarding their play interactions. Child assent was considered essential, allowing children to express their willingness to participate and withdraw at any time. Play interactions — especially those involving ludic-aggressive elements — were recorded in videos and descriptive-analytical narratives, always attending to the meanings constructed by the children in their daily contexts.

For the school management team (secretary, pedagogue, and principal), data were generated through narrative accounts recorded in a field diary. With the teachers, a three-part structured interview was conducted. The first part explored their interpretations of children's behaviors and actions during play in the school routine. In the second part, a hypothetical situation involving ludic-aggressive interactions was presented so they could share their opinions on the proposed scenario. In the third part, they analysed two videos featuring play situations with their students, sharing their impressions of the observed behaviors. Video 1 showed four-year-old children retelling the story of Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf with creativity. Video 2 presented five-year-old children engaging in play involving fighting movements and chases.

The qualitative data analysis was guided by an interpretive perspective, drawing from the frameworks of the Sociology of Childhood and Everyday Life Studies (Sarmiento, 2007; Corsaro, 2011; Alves, 2008). Triangulation of data (observations, videos, interviews, and field diary) contributed to identifying patterns, tensions, and meanings attributed to ludic-aggressive play. From this analytical process, three main categories emerged: (in)safety in play, perception of reality, and recording of reality³.

(In)Safety in play

This category addresses the first part of the interview and reveals the teachers' perspectives on (in)safety in play, highlighting the tension between children's desire for freedom and adults' responsibility to ensure their safety during the *timespaces* of Physical Education.

The dynamics of ludic-aggressive play reflect children's natural curiosity to explore the world and create experiences, while also demanding from adults an attentive gaze capable of recognizing and valuing the unique logics of childhood, which are not always understood or legitimized. This tension also emerges in the teachers' statements, which express discomfort when facing the challenge of balancing group control with children's autonomy, especially when children exceed expected boundaries of supervision during Physical Education or recess. The following testimony clearly illustrates this pedagogical dilemma: "[...] do I leave the group to go after the children who walked out of class, or do I leave the children unattended to take care of the class?" (Interview, PEF1, June 3, 2015). Revealing the daily challenge of handling children's spontaneity without relinquishing adult responsibility.

This logic is expressed through two subcategories: a) cases of aggressive children; and b) school procedures. Regarding aggressiveness, the teachers pointed to behaviors such as bullying, hostility, and emotional dysregulation. These manifestations are often attributed to familial and social contexts, as exemplified by the school secretary's statement: "[...] The fact that the CMEI is located in a peripheral,

³ The categories "Perception of Reality" and "Recording of Reality" emerged from the empirical analysis of the data produced in the field. These categories were not defined a priori but were constructed through dialogue with the empirical material, following the principles of qualitative analysis. The author, in interpreting the participants' statements, systematized and defined these categories to organize the meanings expressed in the narratives. Thus, the categories reflect both the meanings attributed by the participants and the theoretical-methodological mediation carried out by the researcher during the analytical process.

dangerous, and violent neighborhood means that the children are exposed to domestic violence, family conflicts, abuse, neglect, crime, drug trafficking, gang rivalries, and curfews.” (Field journal, FS1, March 23, 2015).

It is important to note that although these statements express the reality experienced by some children, they also reproduce stigmatizing views of marginalized territories and their populations, shifting the responsibility for violence onto families and communities. These discourses may reflect a perspective grounded in adult logic and values, often laden with prejudice toward childhoods lived in contexts of social vulnerability.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that many of these children face adverse conditions that directly impact their emotional and behavioral development. One of the pedagogues observed that children experiencing greater domestic and social issues display: “[...] aggressive, restless behavior, frustration, detachment, mainly reflecting the deterioration of their socio-emotional conditions.” (Field journal, FS2, April 17, 2015). As Corsaro (2011, p. 304) states, “[...] children, more than any other group, are the primary victims of these ills—victims of anger, violence, and neglect in their societies, communities, and families.”

This view is reinforced by one of the teachers, who links children’s aggressive behavior to the violent contexts in which they live: “[...] they see and reproduce these situations in aggressive behavior toward other children—they fight all the time, they want to strike back.” (Interview, PEF2, June 12, 2015).

Candрева et al. (2009) emphasize the importance of preventing hostile attitudes among children through participatory practices, mediation, and dialogue, raising awareness and promoting positive behaviors. The authors also advocate addressing both aggressive and empathetic children, challenging coercive education, and enabling more effective interventions. However, beyond the dichotomy of aggression versus empathy, it is necessary to consider the complexity of children’s play and the meanings they attribute to it. This is evident in episodes observed in the school routine, such as the one described below:

A group of boys and girls were playing a mix of tag, fighting, and simulated police procedures—putting someone against the wall and frisking them. Along with that, phrases like “the police are coming in” and “the shooting is about to start” were heard, with gestures mimicking guns and gunshot sounds. When asked what they were playing, one child responded: “With little guns, police and robbers, fighting... I don’t know, jumping on each other and fighting...”. When asked, “What happens when everyone starts running?” he replied: “We were playing war. The bad guys are trying to catch the police (...). We shoot and fight them!” (Field journal, Cops and Robbers episode; Children aged 5; October 28, 2015).

Criticism of coercive practices gains strength when it is considered that episodes of childhood aggressiveness can also be understood as symbolic expressions of the social realities experienced by the children, as in this case of ludic-aggressive play involving war, chases, and shootouts. While the violent context of the community influences these manifestations, the children blend reality and fantasy, recreating the world through their imaginative logic. These characteristics reveal everyday dimensions that underscore children’s protagonism in constructing their own spaces for coexistence and interaction (Farias & Wiggers, 2019).

Elias (1994) points out that expressions of aggression in play may provoke excitement and pleasure in children, even though they often generate resistance from adults who tend to associate such behaviors with negative conduct. This rejection is linked to institutional structures that influence modes of socialization and define what is considered acceptable in children’s interactions.

According to Luz (2008), understanding the context of childhood socialization is crucial, both at the horizontal level (immediate behaviors and interactions) and the vertical level (institutional and cultural spheres that shape those interactions). She notes: “The horizontal context refers to behaviors and interactions as they occur in time, whereas the vertical context refers to institutional domains that, although distant, deeply influence behavior at the horizontal level” (Luz, 2008, p. 70). It is therefore important to analyse the condition of the CMEI’s children by considering their social reality, external influences, and how

these experiences are reflected in their school play and interactions, involving both macro and micro contexts.

In this context, school procedures are used daily to control children, both during Physical Education and recess. In cases of rebelliousness or aggression, when children refuse to participate in planned activities or persist in inappropriate behaviors, teachers resort to dialogue, negotiation, warnings, reprimands, and, when necessary, disciplinary actions. One teacher described the process as follows: “1st: I start by saying they can't do that; 2nd: I ask, ‘Would you like someone to do this to you?’; 3rd: I give them a warning; 4th: if it's repeated a lot, they sit out for a while; 5th: in extreme cases, they don't play at all during the class.” (Interview, PEF2, June 12, 2015).

The teachers' statements indicate a balance between care, discipline, and control—something that aligns with Elias's (1994) civilizing process theory. According to this view, individuals must follow rules and manage their emotions to adapt to society, enabling harmonious socialization. This implies a progressive internalization of social norms, promoting what Elias calls “self-control or self-discipline of impulses.” This control is reflected in the teachers' statements, who, to make children more “polite” or “civilized,” apply punishments such as excluding them from activities as a form of discipline and reflection (Interview, PEF2, June 3, 2015). Such practices result in the exclusion of more aggressive children from play, leading them through a process of emotional regulation, learning peaceful behaviors, and avoiding violent situations.

The logic of “civilizing” children's emotions and behaviors, present in the teachers' discourse, aligns with Elias's (1994) model of socialization, in which conformity to the norm is a condition for social coexistence. It becomes evident that the school acts as a key pillar in this civilizing process. School discipline and the control of children's bodies—even during play—function as mechanisms to shape behaviors deemed acceptable by adult and institutional logic. The spontaneity of play, the creative disorder of children, and their expressions of affection or aggression often clash with the pedagogical project that, albeit sometimes unconsciously, seeks to “civilize” childhood.

For teachers, aggressive behavior during play disrupts pedagogical moments and peer relationships, raising concerns particularly about the risk of such situations escalating into accidents or injuries. As one teacher stated: “[...] we have a protocol to follow, we're responsible for the children's care... anything they do can turn into a fight.” (Interview, PEF1, June 3, 2015). Another teacher emphasized parents' perceptions of care:

“[...] they always think it's a lack of adult supervision, but it's not. Sometimes the children get hurt because they're running, bump into each other, or fight among themselves.” (Interview, PEF2, June 12, 2015).

According to Redin (2009, p. 118), teachers want children to socialize, and often socializing is equated with avoiding conflict, ambiguous feelings, and behaviors that deviate from order. This raises an important question: Is there an inherent ambiguity in these disciplinary practices? Could these strategies serve as opportunities for children to learn how to resolve the conflicts that naturally arise in play? In this sense, it is crucial to critically examine disciplinary practices that prioritize control and punishment, questioning whether they truly contribute to learning or whether they merely reproduce mechanisms of exclusion and silencing. These concerns lead us to the next category of analysis.

Perception of Reality

This section, corresponding to the second and third parts of the interview, aims to highlight the transformations in Physical Education teachers' representations of ludic-aggressive play. These changes are evidenced through an approach that begins with the presentation of a hypothetical situation involving children's playful interactions, illustrated by specific actions that characterize ludic-aggressive play. Subsequently, videos are shown featuring children from the teachers' groups engaging in behaviors that may correspond to the scenario.

This strategy allows for a comparison between the teachers' initial perceptions and their interpretations based on observing their students, enabling a more contextualized reflection. From this analysis, two main subcategories emerged: perception of reality and recording of reality, which reflect both the interactions among the children and the interpretations made by the teachers.

The perception of reality is understood as the interpretation a subject makes of certain events based on their prior experiences, values, and sociocultural contexts. This interpretation is subjective and can vary significantly from one person to another, even when confronted with the same situation. In this context, the following hypothetical situation was presented:

In a hypothetical situation where a group of boys and girls engage in running and physical contact, alongside fantasy behaviors, excitement, shouting, and turbulent movements, it is observed that the activity unfolds without complaints from the children. Faced with this, what would your reaction be? (Excerpt from interview, 2015).

From this scenario, it is observed that teachers tend to intervene in ludic-aggressive play with warnings, aiming to avoid potential injuries or stop the activity. One teacher stated: "[...] I would call them to the activity and say: 'Be careful, you're going to get hurt.' In my class, I wouldn't allow it..." (Interview, PEF1, June 3, 2015). This statement reflects concern with behaviors deemed inappropriate, such as excessive physical contact and the transgression of previously established rules.

In the study by Logue and Harvey (2009), play fighting was among the most restricted activities in the school environment, even though research shows important distinctions between real aggression and symbolic aggression in play. While they may appear similar, only a small fraction of these interactions—around 0.3% according to Pellegrini (1989)—escalate into real aggression. Pellegrini argues that play fighting plays a vital role in children's emotional and social development, serving as a symbolic practice that allows them to explore limits, develop social skills, and process daily experiences. These findings suggest that such play mostly serves symbolic and socializing functions, forming an integral part of children's cultural construction.

Still, adults often struggle to distinguish symbolic expressions from real aggression, leading to immediate reprimands. One teacher noted: "[...] the problem is they don't separate pretend fighting from real fighting: they punch and kick for real. I think they're very confused..." (Interview, PEF2, June 12, 2015). This statement reveals the complexity of interpreting such play, which is often not viewed through a playful lens. Understanding it requires considering intentions, abilities, and goals involved—what might be called the "combative objectivity" of interactions—a broader and more careful interpretation of what children are communicating.

Smith (1997) emphasizes that teachers should avoid generalizations based on a small group of highly aggressive children who tend to draw more attention, as this may lead to stereotyping. The CMEI principal commented: "[...] games or actions children develop during school hours that are reprimanded by teachers confuse. But trying to understand them fully can help distinguish between play and real fighting." (Field journal, FS3, March 9, 2015). Barbosa, Martins, and Mello (2017, p. 163) reinforce that: "[...] the way children relate to this phenomenon is what will dictate the extent of the manifestation, that is, the limits separating play from non-play."

Despite teachers' concerns with safety and potential conflict, studies show that this kind of play is part of children's experiences. Marques (2010) highlights the pleasure and need for such games, while Pereira et al. (2020) point out that intervention is only necessary when the playful element turns into real aggression.

Sutton-Smith (2001) uses the concept of *nonsense* to describe play that, although seemingly chaotic or irrational, possesses internal logic and symbolic value for children. This perspective helps explain how teachers may perceive ludic-aggressive play: while it may seem problematic or inappropriate to them, for children, it is part of exploring and constructing meaning. Teachers' perceptions of reality may initially be

disconnected from the children's logic. However, through observation, teachers may reinterpret their views, recognizing that aggressive actions may carry playful and functional intentions, even if they deviate from conventional behavioral norms.

According to Chartier (2002), representations are not fixed but are the product of an ongoing negotiation of power and perspectives. Teachers' perceptions of ludic-aggressive play may reflect dominant representations influenced by cultural, pedagogical, and social norms regarding what is appropriate in school. Initially, teachers may see such play as problematic or aggressive because of cultural constructions framing these behaviors as undesirable. However, these perceptions can be expanded by considering the children's logic and meanings attributed to their interactions.

Recording of Reality

In this study, the recording of reality is defined as the act of observing, in real contexts, events, interactions, and behaviors among children during play—in this case, using video recordings. This method enables a deeper analysis, allowing teachers to reflect on the meaning and nuances of children's activities. To support this understanding, two videos were presented of interactions among children in their respective classes for the teachers to evaluate. The aim was to understand how they interpret real situations involving ludic-aggressive play. In the transcription of the first video, four-year-old children narrate and enact the story of the Big Bad Wolf through play.

The children were in the schoolyard while I was filming, and I was surprised by their storytelling about the Big Bad Wolf who lived at school. I asked, "Where does the Big Bad Wolf stay? Is he here in this playground now? Show me where he is," because I had seen them playing with this theme near a door. "Yes!" "He stays up there," they replied, leading me to the door. I asked, "Is he in that house, behind that door?" pointing to the location. "Yes," they responded, making faces and expressing fear and excitement, imitating how the Wolf would act when they approached. "And what do you do when he does that?" I asked. I heard different responses overlapping: one boy said, "I fight him!" A girl replied, "Then the hunter comes to kill him." Another boy said, "And the police also killed the Big Bad Wolf, like this [pow-pow], for real," making gun gestures and sounds. During the conversation, another boy put his jacket over his head and approached the children, making noises and extending his arms as if to grab someone. I asked, "Who are you?" The boy answered, "I'm the Big Bad Wolf!" "Oh my God, he's the Big Bad Wolf!" I said, reacting with fear. Other children began to say they were tigers, monsters, and police officers; some ran away, others pretended to be scared, others fought the Wolf, and some tried to defeat him. Then they ran toward the door saying, "He's here!" "He opened the door!" "Run!" "Kill him!" "I'm going to finish him off!" (Big Bad Wolf Video; Four-year-old children; Video length: 2min42sec; June 3, 2015).

After the teachers watched the video, they were asked to share their impressions. Their initial reaction was one of disapproval, primarily due to concerns that the children might get hurt while running or reenacting fight scenes with the child playing the Big Bad Wolf, as well as because of the overall turbulence of their behavior. However, the teachers also acknowledged that the activity was not excessively aggressive. One commented: "[...] I don't think the activity was aggressive, but when there are guns, gun sounds, and when they change the activity to reflect the context they live in—like the police killing the wolf—I don't like it, and I tell them they can't do that." (Interview, PEF1, June 3, 2015).

According to Sarmiento (2003, pp. 53-54), "[...] the common condition of childhood has its symbolic dimension in childhood cultures (...), constructing systematic ways of making sense of the world and intentional action that differ from those of adults." This perspective reinforces how children and adults may assign different meanings to the same situations, revealing diverse ways of seeing, interpreting, and acting in the world.

In the intersection between adult and child logics, it is interesting to observe how traditional narratives, such as the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, are received in different ways. In the classic version, for example, the hunter uses weapons and gunfire to save the grandmother from the Wolf—elements that

one teacher explicitly disapproved of. This reaction prompts reflection: Are we witnessing a tendency to soften or romanticize the villainy present in children's stories? It is important to consider that children, through play, transform, reinvent, and update these narratives, creating a fantasy environment where playful, cultural, and social variables intersect. In these interactions, frightening elements—such as monsters, villains, or risky situations—are often incorporated not necessarily as something negative, but as part of a creative process that allows them to play with what scares them.

In this sense, Barbosa, Martins, and Mello (2017) suggest that this symbolic make-believe language can serve as a coping tool, a symbolic antidote to the violence children experience in their daily lives. Brougère (2008, p. 78) adds that war or fighting play offers children a means to experience the world and reframe their experiences. According to him, “war is one of the main sources of exploration, adventure, and rupture with the everyday,” thus creating new meanings and possibilities.

Immediate adult rejection of such elements can limit children's creative exploration and their ability to reframe emotions and fears through play. However, these representations evolved during the teachers' reflections. They began to see the activity as play, intertwined with moments of fantasy: “[...] they like danger, adrenaline, fear!” (Interview, PEF1, June 3, 2015). “[...] actually, I don't see it as aggressive... this is part of their routine; they like to play fight... [pause]. It's very interesting, I see where you're going: aggressiveness isn't just punches and kicks, fantasy connects everything!” (Interview, PEF2, June 12, 2015).

Sarmiento (2003) notes that pretend play blends reality and imagination, recreating actions and expanding possibilities, allowing children to engage with peers reciprocally and acceptably. Hewes (2014) adds that even when play seems aggressive, it can foster empathy, self-control, and prevent violent behaviors. In the second video, this dynamic is expanded in interactions among five-year-old children:

The children arrived in the playground excited to play, and we observed them interacting in various ways. Three distinct situations emerged: 1) Two pairs (boy-girl and boy-boy) played a strength-testing game, pushing each other until one reached a point or gave up. One boy initially seemed to just watch but later acted in a dual role: as “referee,” checking if the rules were followed, and as “cheerleader,” encouraging others to continue. Although not directly involved, he participated from the outside. 2) Meanwhile, other boys played fight scenes, mimicking punches, kicks, shouts, and enthusiastic expressions until spinning in pairs or trios became the highlight of the game, involving strength, dizziness, and a desire to be thrown to the ground repeatedly. At one point, the teacher intervened because they were too close to her. She asked them to stop, but they continued. 3) Elsewhere, three boys played “cops and robbers,” placing one boy in a small playhouse as a jail while the others guarded the door. They soon started play-fighting. More boys and girls joined, engaging in punches, kicks, verbal improvisations, cartoon character quotes, pretending to send imaginary powers, acting dead, falling to the ground, and making physical contact sounds. (Little Fights Video; Five-year-old children; Video length: 2min07sec; May 16, 2015).

After viewing the second video, the teachers expressed a shift in perspective, interpreting ludic-aggressive play more positively as they realized the children were playing, not fighting. Even though the play was more intense than in the first video, the teachers recognized the playful nature of the activity: “[...] I was surprised that everyone plays at fighting, both those far from and close to each other! These sounds and these hits, I think they get them from cartoons and video games...” (Interview, PEF1, June 3, 2015).

Barbosa (2023) emphasizes that children appropriate the images and representations they are exposed to, such as animated shows, which influence the construction of new meanings and become common references in their play experiences. In this sense, as Brougère (2008, p. 78) affirms, play can be understood as a “[...] confrontation with the violence of the world, an encounter with that violence at a symbolic level (...), appearing as a way to escape the child's limited life, to project themselves into an exciting alternative universe.” Thus, play becomes a symbolic space where children creatively rework elements of the social world, including its tensions and contradictions.

In this context, Fairclough's (2003) concept of *modality* becomes relevant. It refers to how teachers interpret or express their perceptions of ludic-aggressive play, sometimes with certainty, sometimes with doubt, permission, or disapproval. In analysing the teachers' discourse during the video discussions, the data

reveal a range of *modality* levels, from labelling behaviors as "unacceptable" or "aggressive" to showing openness in understanding them as part of playful contexts. Thus, how teachers articulate these actions reflects not only what they see but also how they construct meaning in a transition from initial perceptions to more critical and contextualized understandings.

This reflection also appears in their reactions to the videos. One teacher expressed surprise and uncertainty when trying to interpret the play's meaning: "[...] actually, I feel kind of lost... I don't know if they're showing something unconscious, or what they see or do at home, or if it's a way to release emotions... this video surprised me, I didn't imagine they could play like this without it turning into a fight..." (Interview, PEF2, June 12, 2015). This comment highlights the complexity of the meanings attributed to play and how it challenges the boundaries between acceptable and punishable behavior in school. As Jones (2004) argues, when children play with their aggressiveness through fighting or simulating real-world violence, they learn to manage their emotions safely and constructively.

In this process of observation and reinterpretation, the *struggle over representations* (Chartier, 2002) also manifests in the language teachers use to describe and classify such play. Some adopt more normative discourses, associating these practices with behavioral deviance, while others take a more open and reflective stance, recognizing them as legitimate expressions of children's sociocultural development. These differing readings reveal symbolic disputes over what is considered "right" or "wrong" and show how social representations are constantly negotiated, challenged by children's concrete practices and teachers' reflective engagement.

In this way, the recording of reality provides a concrete basis for teachers to reconsider their perceptions and actions, as demonstrated in the analysis of children's play around fictional narratives. This process of observation and reflection allows adults to approach children's logic, recognizing it not only as a reflection of the surrounding culture but also as a legitimate form of expression, experimentation, and learning. By understanding ludic-aggressive play as symbolic and contextual manifestations, teachers can expand their listening and make pedagogical practices more flexible, fostering environments that are more welcoming, creative, and respectful of the world of childhood.

Final considerations

The ludic-aggressive play observed in this study reveals itself as a meaningful practice and an essential part of children's socialization processes and the production of childhood cultures. Both the epigraph from Froebel (1907), which calls us to learn by observing children, and the words of Manoel de Barros (2003), which inspire us to see the world from the child's perspective, guided our view throughout this writing. Through their playful bodies, children teach us to suspend certainties, to challenge crystallized notions of what is "right," "appropriate," or "allowed." In this context, to "unsee" the world means opening ourselves to other ways of perceiving and learning from the school routine and the interactions that unfold within it.

The research revealed the coexistence, sometimes conflicting, of child and adult logics surrounding ludic-aggressive play. Children's logic is rooted in sensory experimentation, corporeality, the pleasure of testing limits, and building shared meaning with peers. In contrast, adult logic is often shaped by discourses of control, discipline, and risk, tending to suppress or classify such play as inappropriate, violent, or dangerous. This tension does not always manifest explicitly but is present in the discourses and practices that permeate everyday school life. Careful listening to both children and teachers revealed that experiences of symbolic struggle and confrontation are part of how young children engage with the world, make sense of it, and re-signify it.

Moreover, the research process itself became a formative journey for the participating teachers. The joint analysis of records, the dialogues established, and the listening to children's voices led to meaningful shifts in their understanding of play and childhood. As their perception and recording of reality were

transformed by direct engagement with children's practices, the teachers began to recognize in ludic-aggressive play not only the risks but also the connection, creativity, elaboration of lived experiences, and the building of bonds.

Among the study's contributions, it is important to highlight the transformation: the recognition of play as a legitimate language of childhood, even when it challenges expected patterns of docility. When children's voices are taken seriously, they challenge norms, expand horizons, and inspire practices that are more committed to an ethics of care and the appreciation of childhood cultures. As for limitations, this study acknowledges its specific focus, which is restricted to a single institution, age, and temporal context. Therefore, its results cannot be generalized but should be understood within their local and relational depth. For future research, it is recommended that future studies explore the impact of these logics in other educational contexts and deepening teacher training in listening to and valuing childhood in its multiple expressions, especially those that challenge normative adult perspectives.

This study concludes that by "unseeing" the world alongside children, one is invited to reconsider established certainties and learn from them. Perhaps it is the most powerful lesson childhood offers: an invitation to relearn how to play with the world, with all its potential and contradictions.

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