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Children's narratives about play in the context of transition from pre-school to the first elementary school year

Narrativas de crianças sobre o jogo em contexto de transição da educação infantil para o 1º ano do ensino fundamental

Narrativas de niños sobre el juego en contexto de transición de la guardería a la enseñanza primaria

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Abstract

It aims to examine and problematize, through children's narratives, the transition from kindergarten to the 1st year of elementary school, where it concerns playing at school. Authors like Formosinho and Brougère were considered, and it took a qualitative-exploratory nature via narrative interviews with 13 children in the last phase of kindergarten and the 1st year of elementary school. Based on Content Analysis, the results of the Play Culture category highlighted activities with water and/or pools; Dress-up and costume games; Tag and hide-and-seek; Sandboxes and Wooden Outdoor Playground. The findings showed children's favorite games, environments or playful media they wished were available at the schools. The study was indicative of a less stimulating structure in the elementary school facility than in the kindergarten space in the elements: available playtime, playful environments and possibilities for experiences with symbolic games or with the whole body. The authors warn about the needed consideration about childhood staying transient to the 1st year and that the transition between cycles could be more successful if that aspect is valued yet in the perspective of a understanding of learning in continuity, as opposed to a rupture between cycles.

***Keywords**: Kindergarten to Elementary School Transition. Play. Children's narratives.*

Resumo

Objetiva examinar e problematizar por meio de narrativas de crianças, a transição da Educação Infantil para o 1º ano do Ensino Fundamental no que se refere ao jogo na escola. Considerou-se os autores como Formosinho e Brougère e assumiu a natureza qualitativa-exploratória por meio de entrevistas narrativas com 13 crianças na última fase da Educação Infantil e no 1º ano do Ensino Fundamental. Com base na Análise de Conteúdo, os resultados da categoria Cultura Lúdica evidenciaram Atividades com água e/ou piscina; Brincadeiras com fantasia; Pega-pega e esconde-esconde; Tanques de areia e Brinquedão de madeira. Os achados mostraram os jogos preferidos das crianças, ambientes e/ou suportes lúdicos que gostariam que estivessem presentes nas escolas. O estudo foi indicativo de que a escola de Ensino Fundamental possui uma estrutura menos estimuladora do que a Educação Infantil nos seguintes elementos: tempo disponível para o jogo, ambientes lúdicos e possibilidades para experiências com o jogo simbólico ou com o corpo. As autoras alertam sob a necessária consideração de que a infância permanece em trânsito para o Ensino Fundamental e a transição entre ciclos pode ser mais exitosa se for valorizada na perspectiva de uma compreensão de aprendizagem em continuidade, e não da ruptura entre ciclos.

Palavras-chave: Transição Educação Infantil e Ensino Fundamental. Jogo. Narrativas de crianças.

Resumen

Objetiva examinar y problematizar, por medio de narrativas de niños, la transición de la Guardería a la enseñanza primaria, con relación al juego en la escuela. Se han considerado los autores como Formosinhos y Brougère y asumió la naturaleza cualitativa-exploratoria por medio de entrevistas narrativas con 13 niños en la última fase de la guardería y en el primer año de la enseñanza primaria. Basado en el Análisis de Contenido, los resultados de la categoría Cultura Lúdica evidenciaron actividades con agua y/o piscina; Juegos con fantasía; Pilla-pilla y escondidas; Tanques de arena y Juegos de madera. Lo que fue encontrado nos enseñó los juegos preferidos de los niños, ambientes o suportes lúdicos que les gustaría tener en las escuelas. El estudio fue indicativo de que la escuela primaria tiene una estructura menos estimuladora que la guardería en los elementos: tiempo disponible para el juego, ambientes lúdicos y posibilidades para experiencias con el juego simbólico o con el cuerpo entero. Las autoras alertan bajo la necesaria consideración de que la niñez sigue en tránsito para el primer año de la primaria y la transición entre ciclos puede ser más exitosa si este aspecto es valorado en la perspectiva aún de una comprensión de aprendizaje en continuidad y no ruptura entre ciclos.

***Palabras clave**: Transición Guardería y Enseñanza Primaria. Juego. Narrativas de niños.*

Introduction

This article stems from a completed research project that aimed to examine and question, through children's narratives, the transition process from Early Childhood Education to the 1st year of Elementary School, particularly regarding the practice of play in schools. To this end, it focused on listening to children aged 6 and 7 in school settings.

The theoretical inquiry into the concept of the child and childhood in the history of European and Brazilian education (Ariès, 2018; Kuhlmann Jr., 1998; Postman, 1999; Del Priore, 2018), from the Middle Ages (5th to 15th centuries) to the present day, indicates that the ways children have learned and developed—both past and contemporary—have evolved in accordance with institutional linkages. In the Brazilian context, the 1946 Constitution established a process for setting educational guidelines and frameworks, culminating in the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (LDB) in 1961. This law, after various amendments, became the current LDB (No.

9.394/96). From then on, Brazilian education became a duty of the State, ensuring free, quality, and compulsory public schooling for children aged four to seventeen, covering Early Childhood Education, Elementary, and Secondary School (Brazil, 1996; Brazil, 1988).

Highlighting the legal recognition of early childhood education as the first stage of basic education, the

Ministry of Education (MEC) began publishing documents to define its role and objectives. In 1998, the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (RCNEI) (Brazil, 1998) were published to guide reflections on objectives and content and to provide orientations for professionals. In 2006, the National Quality Parameters for Early Childhood Education (Brazil, 2006) were introduced to establish culturally coherent parameters while considering the child as a historical and social subject, both product and producer of culture. In 2009, the MEC published the Quality Indicators for Early Childhood Education (Brazil, 2009), aimed at detailing the indicators outlined in the earlier guidelines. Later that year, the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI) (Brazil, 2010) were enacted to consolidate principles, foundations, and procedures to support the organization, planning, implementation, and assessment of pedagogical proposals. More recently, the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) (Brazil, 2017) introduced a model based on "Fields of Experience," which pedagogically integrates interaction, play, and children's languages as central elements of the curriculum and the educational process itself.

Taken together, these documents provide guidelines—within proportion—for ensuring that actions in daycare centers and preschools occur in an inseparable context of educating and caring. They also offer conceptions for the processes of teaching, learning, and child development across biopsychosocial dimensions, materialized in curricular organization. The BNCC (Brazil, 2017, p. 36) states that "[...] in Early Childhood Education, children's learning and development are structured around interactions and play." It defines "living together, playing, participating, exploring, expressing, and knowing oneself" as essential rights for the comprehensive development of the child, along with respecting the specific needs of children at this unique stage of human life. As such, the document reinforces the foundational pillars of interaction and play, previously outlined by the DCNEI (Brazil, 2010).

The DCNEI (Brazil, 2010) defines interactions as critical moments in relationships established between children and both peers and adults (teachers, family members, etc.), while acknowledging the contextual and cultural diversity of children and their uniqueness. These interactions go beyond oral language mediation to include nonverbal communication and the sharing of experiences and knowledge.

Aligned with this understanding of interaction, the idea of a transition between two educational stages is proposed to problematize the shift from the final phase of Early Childhood Education to the 1st year of elementary school. This study embraces the concept of educational transition (Formosinho; Formosinho; Monge, 2016). The authors emphasize that transitions experienced by children are moments that influence

their growth and development. Educational processes (such as schooling) involve continuous ecological transitions. These transitions require planning, experimentation, evaluation, or educator support, ensuring alignment with the contexts and cultures of children. Transitions are not sporadic events; they are part of the lived experience of childhood. The authors stress that successful transitions do not depend on the child's "readiness" but on the engagement of all participants in the child's social circle, such as family and education professionals envolved.

The transition between early childhood education and elementary school needs to be studied, especially since the earlier entrance age into elementary school raises many unanswered questions about pedagogical practice (Sim-Sim, 2010). Legally and politically, this transition occurs when children are six years old, as established by Law

No. 11.114/05 of February 2006, which amended LDB No. 9394/96 and extended elementary education to nine years.

In the National Curriculum Guidelines for Basic Education (Brazil, 2013), the issue of transition is addressed in relation to whether it occurs within the same institution (i.e., early childhood and elementary education in the same building), in which case teachers must coordinate and ensure continuity of development and learning. Alternatively, when transitions occur between different institutions, it often leads to feelings of estrangement, requiring careful articulation. Furthermore,

> "[...] it is not a matter of transferring to six-year-olds the content and activities of the traditional first grade, but of conceiving a new organizational structure for content within a nine-year Elementary Education, considering the profile of its students" (Brazil, 2004, p. 17).

Thus, it is crucial that the receiving school has access to records from the previous school to understand the learning and development processes already experienced by the child (Brazil, 2013). The National Curriculum Guidelines for Basic Education (Brazil, 2013), though briefly, present suggestions to support articulation between stages, allowing transitions without tensions or disruptions.

Ensuring collaboration between early childhood and elementary school teachers (through meetings, visits, etc.) and maintaining documentation—such as classroom portfolios, pedagogical evaluation reports, attendance records, and children's achievements—allows Elementary School teachers to understand prior learning experiences. Regardless of whether the transition occurs within the same institution or between institutions, continuity in development and the child's right to education must be ensured (Brazil, 2010).

The National Curriculum Guidelines for Elementary Education also highlight that lack of articulation between stages is an issue that needs to be resolved. To this end, the document recommends incorporating early childhood education practices into the early years of elementary education. Similarly, the Guidelines for the Inclusion of SixYear-Old Children (Brazil, 2006, p. 7) suggest that both stages should ensure "learning necessary for successful continuation of studies." The BNCC, in turn, seeks to connect experiences from both stages of basic education, emphasizing the value of play in learning and the systematization of new experiences and new ways children relate to the world (Brazil, 2017).

Moss (2008) explores the transition process and the relationship between early childhood and elementary education. He proposes four possible types of relationships based on institutional context. The first is based on the concept of schooling, wherein early childhood education prepares children to fit into the formal structure and standards of school culture. The second identifies divergence in pedagogical approaches, leading to a gap between stages as early childhood teachers resist traditional didactics. The third involves preparing to receive children in the new educational phase, calling into question how elementary institutions are organized to welcome them. Moss (2008) recommends that schools modify their physical environments, rearrange materials, logistics, and structures, and also adapt curricula and teaching practices—since merely childproofing environments do not ensure meaningful transitions. The fourth model he presents is based on sharing school culture, where both stages engage in common, integrated practices, acting as equal partners in children's learning. In participatory pedagogies, continuity of pedagogical

practices along with materials and environment are quality indicators when the child is placed at the center and their learning and development are prioritized.

Formosinho et al. (2016, p. 101) highlight that "transitions between cycles represent educational continuity between early childhood education and elementary school." There is an experiential continuum in the construction and progression of knowledge. The need for educational continuity arises from the understanding that learning is an experiential and reflective continuum. The authors emphasize the necessary consideration of the transition between cycles within the logic of educational continuity (progressive sequencing) as opposed to a prevailing logic, which is that of regressive sequencing. Progressive sequencing is supported by the perspective of New School or Progressive Education, where learning is permanent, a continuum of experiential learning in which the previous experiences serve as a spiral architecture for the subsequent ones. On the other hand, in regressive sequencing, the ultimate goal is university preparation, and each school stage ends in itself, serving only as a preparation for the next level.

> Since basic education is the education that society considers essential for all citizens, it is based on the ideal of equality—on a logic of equal access and equal success, which implies the prioritization of promoting educational success over the logic of school selection (Formosinho, 2016, p. 103).

The idea of a transition between educational cycles is assumed in which learning is considered to be permanent or lifelong—a continuum. Thus, early childhood education is understood as continuous with the 1st year of elementary school. This means that the 1st year should incorporate the experiential learning lived during the last stage (preschool), valuing it and taking it as a continuous part of the child's learning. In other words, learning should build upon what is already known, ensuring continuity and coherence in the learning process, rather than assuming that schooling (and learning) begins only when the child enters the 1st year. "This is a transition not only of children and families between two different contexts but also between two different pedagogical, organizational, and institutional cultures" (Formosinho, 2016, p. 103).

The author highlights concern about this leap between two school cultures, emphasizing that in organizational, institutional, and pedagogical terms, the transition must not materialize as a cultural rupture or express a transmissive culture in the 1st year typical of the early grades. Conversely, bringing into early childhood education a regressive sequential approach with a transmissive principle—teaching everything to everyone at the same time—only serves to institutionalize children prematurely, to the detriment of their development (Formosinho, 2016).

Given this, there is no place for claims that the experiential practices of early childhood education are

unrelated to the daily routines and activities of the 1st year of elementary school. Nor is there room for the notion of a preparatory early childhood education (focused on content transmission) to promote a child's maturation or readiness for the 1st year. For instance, play—freely allowed and valued as an educational element in early childhood education but measured and didactic in elementary school—loses its pedagogical meaning. Play is an educational element, a mediator or tool of thought for the internalization of scientific knowledge starting in early childhood education, not just upon entering formal schooling. In this context, the present study addresses play as inherent to the transition process from early childhood education to the 1st year of elementary school, starting from the question: how does children's play manifest between preschool and the transitional phase into 1st grade? The study presents and problematizes play based on narratives from children in preschool and 1st grade within the context of school cycle transition.

The mobilization of recent literature that regards the child as a central subject of scientific studies (Dias, 2014; Espiridião, 2015; Checconi, 2016; Medeiros, 2016; Ferrão, 2016; Santos, 2018) shows that research on school transition often focuses on children at only one stage of basic education (either early childhood education or the beginning of elementary school), but not between cycles. Moreover, these studies tend not to center the debate around the presence of play in these school cultures, or they reduce play to a mere methodological tool for learning. This entails the risk of seeing play as overly didactic or merely as a

content delivery activity, especially in Elementary School. The study from which this article derives gained relevance by focusing its central discussion on the necessity of play in the child's learning process concretized in the daily actions of the curriculum in both early childhood education and elementary school.

Playing, referred to as such in early childhood education, represents a fundamental form of child expression, as it offers a means for exploring the world and building knowledge in a pleasurable and meaningful way. It reflects reality and allows children to understand people, events, and contexts and to create meaning from those experiences. From the perspective of human development, authors of the historical-cultural theory (Vygotsky, Leontiev, and Luria) define this action as a mediator of human cultural appropriation and a condition for the development of higher psychological functions such as speech, thought, imagination, and attention—functions intrinsic to the constitution of intelligence and personality (Leontiev, 1978).

The DCNEI (National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education), in turn, consider play to be a structuring element of learning in early childhood education. It is worth noting that, despite the DCNEI using the term "play," international literature generally refers to it as "game" (Brougère, 2011; Huizinga, 2021; Elkonin, 1998). Brazilian literature distinguishes between "brincar" (free play) and "jogar" (structured games) as social acts that, while related and part of the ludic culture, carry distinct characteristics. In this sense, games involve solid rules, unchanging until the end of each round and defined at the beginning of play. Players may be competitors, but they are always partners. In free play, rules exist but are hidden and more flexible (e.g., in playing school, where social roles have behavioral rules) (Kishimoto, 2010).

This study adopts the concept of the game from the international literature (Brougère, 2011; Huizinga, 2021; Elkonin, 1998), understood as a voluntary human activity involving manipulation of reality to fulfil desires or interests, marked by limits of space and time, and seen as a way of comprehending reality—generating both pleasure and displeasure. A game is opposed to reality but grounded in it, serious, and guided by rules—whether flexible or not. In other words, when speaking of a game, one is also referring to play.

Brougère (2011) refers to a specific culture of game known as ludic culture. This encompasses a set of

procedures that enable the realization of this social act, which arises from a broader culture. According to the author, ludic culture corresponds to a "set of rules and meanings inherent to the game, which the player acquires and masters in the context of their game" (Brougère, 2011, p. 23). In addition to being a receiver of culture, the child, by playing, is also a cultural agent, as they are socially transformed through appropriation and can also modify and be modified. Moments of play are crucial to the processes of socialization, interaction, formation, and production of childhood cultures, establishing it as a social fact within the child's life context.

Methodological Trajectory

The study conducted was of an exploratory qualitative nature (Minayo, 1994; Bogdan & Biklen, 1994; Lüdke & André, 1986). Empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews based on the perspective of children's oral narratives (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2008; Cruz, 2008). The aim was to understand what children narrated about the transition from early childhood education to the 1st year of elementary school, focusing on how they experienced play during this process.

The participants were children from a municipal early childhood education institution (in the final stage of preschool) and the same children upon entering the 1st year of a municipal elementary school, both located in a city in the interior of São Paulo, Brazil. The institutions were indicated by the Municipal Department of Education of the participating city, based on proximity, as the same children transitioned from one unit to the other.

Twenty-one children from a preschool class were invited to participate in the study. However, the oral narratives of 13 children (10 girls and 3 boys, aged between 6 and 7 years) were analyzed based on established criteria. It is important to note that the difference in the number of girls and boys is due to the composition of the class itself and not to any gender-based selection criteria. The only inclusion criterion applied was children enrolled in a 1st-year afternoon class at the investigated elementary school who had previously attended the afternoon preschool program at the city's Center for Recreation and Education. That is, data production occurred with the same children while they were enrolled in early childhood education and again when they entered the 1st year of elementary school (at the beginning of the school year).

The exclusion criteria established were:

i) children not coming from the participating Center for Recreation and Education; ii) children who changed schools and/or class shifts upon entering elementary school or who were not entering elementary school at the time;

iii) children from classes other than the 1st-year afternoon class at the participating municipal school.

Cruz (2008) points out that since the 20th century, children began to appear in studies as research participants, most of which were based on psychological theories and methodologies. However, these studies did not aim to clarify children's opinions, wishes, or preferences, revealing that even when children were the "object" of the study or participants, they were not seen or understood as individuals capable of communication. Additionally, most research was conducted in laboratory settings, thus artificializing empirical contexts.

The main study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the affiliated public university[1]. Ethical precautions were taken regarding the participation and anonymity of the children's identities. These included: the researcher's prior familiarization with the group of children through visits to the school units and spending several days in the daily routine of the institutions; the use of an Informed Assent Form, read aloud in a group discussion and accompanied by drawings to support the child's agreement to participate in the research; the adoption of fictitious names; group members for data collection sessions were chosen by the children themselves; sessions were conducted at the Early Childhood Education Center and at the school (in familiar environments, selected by the participants); the data collection space was arranged to ensure children's comfort, and the way the interview questions were explained or proposed prioritized informal language adapted to the children's level of understanding.

Children's responses were respected without pressure to elaborate or answer unwillingly; responses such as "I don't know," "I don't want to answer," or "I'm tired" were accepted. Laughter, gestures of interaction, silence, and its eventual interruption through continued storytelling were all acknowledged, allowing children to speak comfortably and freely. When a child expressed doubt, the question was explained again. Children's speech was also organized so that when one child spoke, the others waited.

The official empirical data collection sessions in preschool were conducted in small groups (mostly pairs, some trios) with an average duration of 77 minutes—51 minutes for the first script and 26 minutes for the second. This phase of data collection spanned four days—three for the first script and one for the second. In the 1st year of elementary school, data collection occurred on a single day with one interview script due to the onset of the COVID19 pandemic and the suspension of in-person activities in schools[2]. In this phase, interviews were conducted remotely and individually, recorded and later transcribed, with an average duration of 42 minutes each.

For the preschool data collection phase, two interview scripts were proposed, with questions aimed at the same objectives but phrased differently to suit children's language and comprehension abilities and to

[1] Approval number: CAAE no 19691719.90000.5504.

[2] Through Decree No. 64,864 of March 16, 2020, the Brazilian government's sudden regulation mandating the suspension of in-person activities in schools—implemented during the empirical data collection period—affected the development of the research project. Originally planned for full execution over 24 months, the project required adjustments, including a reduction in the number of interview sessions with the 1st-grade elementary school children.

ensure reliability and confirmation of responses. The scripts included questions such as: What does playing or gaming mean to you? What do you like to play or do at school? Do you like coming to school? Why? How would you like school to be? What would you like to do during your school time? Tell me about your games or playtime at school. Do they happen? How? What do you think about school? Tell me what your dream school would be like. What would a school be like where you'd want to stay every day? What would you like to do at school? Tell me.

"Prioritizing the child's voice requires a research methodology that considers the multiple expressions of the child's world" (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2008, p. 7). Therefore, some steps proposed by the author were followed, such as verifying whether the questions addressed what the study aimed to uncover; ensuring they were not ambiguous; and confirming that the child understood what was being asked. To this end, a pilot data collection was conducted with fifteen children divided into six groups.

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child ensures children's right to be heard, to participate, and to have control over their lives. According to Oliveira-Formosinho (2008), we must also believe that children have the competence to understand, reflect, provide valid responses, and participate in social life, as they are beings with cognitive, moral, social, emotional, and rational capacities.

For data organization and analysis, content analysis techniques were applied (Bardin, 1979). This approach is defined as "a research technique that aims to provide objective, systematic, and quantitative descriptions of the manifest content of communication" (p. 19). Initially, the study corpus was organized from the transcription of the interviews. Next came the definition of recording units, followed by the delimitation of thematic contexts and, finally, enumeration, frequency analysis, and category definition. Four categories emerged a posteriori from the main study. This article presents the category related to play culture, formed by five recording units, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Category and Units of Record

Category 1	Units of Record
Play Culture	a. Activities with water and/or pool
	b. Dress-up play (fantasy play)
	c. Tag and hide-and-seek
	d. Sand pits
	e. Wooden playground structure

Source: Adapted from [omitted]

Play Culture: Favorite Games and the 'Dream' School

The results regarding play culture stem from identifying children's favorite games—those most frequently played and those they would like to have as toys or games in their ideal 'dream' school. One can say that the set of games identified constitutes the children's school play culture (Brougère, 1997; 2015). Play culture is formed within the context of interpersonal relationships in which the child participates, and it comprises various dynamics such as playing games and transmitting accumulated culture. This means that when children teach a way of playing to another child, they transmit and give meaning to both the broader culture and their own play culture (Brougère, 2011).

According to the author, child development does not generate play culture per se, but rather determines which experiences are possible, since play culture is formed within established social relations.

It is defined by interpersonal relationships. Each society will have its own play culture; therefore, no one will share the exact same culture as another. Brougère (2015, p. 25) proposes: "Play culture is not a monolithic block, but a living, diverse whole depending on individuals and groups, based on play habits, climate conditions, or spatial arrangements." A child is not born knowing how to play as a natural part of development, but rather "learns to play," as Brougère (1997, p. 104) emphasizes.

Based on the methodological aspects chosen for the study, the children's narrated and produced play actions in both research contexts are presented and discussed.

The results highlighted the following games and preferences for a dream school: water games and/or swimming pools; costume play; tag and hide-and-seek; sandboxes and large wooden playgrounds. Water-related games and swimming pools emerged from questions about what their dream school would look like—both for children in early childhood education and in the first years of elementary school. Water activities or pools were among the games most desired by the participants at school (this finding was present in narratives from both school settings). However, a stronger emphasis on water games was evident in narratives from children during the preschool phase. These interviews were conducted in the summer, during a period of high temperatures, which may explain why they were so frequently mentioned.

It's also worth considering that in these children's understanding, water as a toy or support for games may be perceived as more accessible or allowed in early childhood education than in the first grade. This suggests that transitions between school stages should consider differing school cultures. Children seem to recognize that early childhood education offers a slightly more flexible culture compared to the more rigid school culture of the early elementary years (starting with the first grade). We may also interpret an understanding of school as a space for recreation, fun, imaginative creation, and joyful play in the pool and with other children—an image that contrasts with the idea of studying and learning.

> Jhulia: "I *wanted* there to be a bunch of pools at school" [emphasizes "bunch" and opens her arms wide to show scale]
> Alice B. [lying on the floor]: "But I'd just go in the deep pool and relax"
> Alice B.: "Also, like, an amusement park" [Lavinia speaks at the same time, trying to finish her friend's sentence]
> Researcher: "An amusement park?"
> Jhulia: "A water one"
> Alice B.: "Everything is water!"
> Researcher: "Oh, cool. So, tell me, what would your dream school be like?"
> Lavinia [immediately responds with enthusiasm and laughter]: "It has a pool"
> Yasmin [agreeing]: "Pool!" (Narrative 1, Diary 2, Jhulia, Alice B., and Maria Joaquina, 2019)

The composition of play culture is shaped by various factors beyond climate. Undoubtedly, the society in which the child is embedded plays a decisive role, as games reflect regional culture in its cultural, economic, political, environmental, and generational aspects. Games are diversified by the values present in the society. In these findings, the pool, as a powerful play environment or giant toy, was idealized and desired.

The results show that outdoor environments were preferred in both school settings, whereas indoor classrooms, their specific furniture, didactic toys, symbolic games, building games, or even books were not highlighted in children's narratives (in both educational stages). Water and pools, as playful elements, stood in essential contrast to serious school activities such as studying, reading, completing tasks, or engaging in pedagogical games (both in preschool and first grade).

This finding aligns with the historical view that contrasts play and study activities. According to Brougère (1998), this contrast leads to confusion about what is or isn't considered a game (in the sense of free play) versus what constitutes school-related play (used as a didactic tool or directed game). The author also emphasizes that play has historically only been accepted in early childhood education as directed or didactic play—as opposed to free play. This means that playing in a pool (as desired by the children) is not generally viewed from a school perspective as something that would support study and learning. Pool play

and water games are seen instead as recreational activities (associated with clubs, home environments, or childhood bodily practices) and not as pedagogical or educational activities—even in early childhood education.

Role-playing games, which included costume use, were also prominently featured in this study. Costumes, as symbolic tools, were favored by children, especially in the early childhood education stage. Vygotsky (1998) sees imagination as a defining characteristic of play, involving (re)creation and fantasy to meet needs and desires. Pretend play, such as imitating characters using costumes, allows children to separate thought from real objects—redefining objects and enriching the imaginative experience. This process involves manipulating reality and embodying idealized or mysterious characters in order to understand their lives, as Campbell (2010) suggests.

> "Play culture encompasses more specific content that overlays these general structures in the form of characters (like Superman or others), creating particular games shaped by children's interests, trends, and current events. Play culture borrows elements from a child's surrounding culture to adapt them for play." (Brougère, 1998, p. 4)

As Facci (2004) points out, this preference is explained by the fact that in early childhood education, the dominant activity is role-playing or pretend play (also called symbolic games). Through pretend play, the child learns about rules—since they must follow the rules that belong to the role being played, such as the behaviors of a certain character. This result appeared in children's narratives at both educational stages.

> Researcher: "And what do you play when you're in costume?"
> Manoela: "Ah..." [interrupted]
> Julinha: "Oh, we play princesses, because we dress like princesses" [flips hair back to mimic princesses] Manoela: "We twirl around, we do anything"
> Julinha: "We play spinning games"
> Manoela: "There are lots of pretty dresses and the school is fun too"
> Julinha: "I like the long sparkly ones best" [runs her hand along her leg to show how long the dress is]. (Narrative 2, Diary 1, Julinha and Manoela, 2019)

Costume play was mentioned only by the girls. When asked about the types of costumes available at school, they mentioned only princess or other so-called "feminine" costumes.

> Jhulia [speaking at the same time as Alice B.]: "We love playing dress-up"
> Alice B. [hugs Maria Joaquina and whispers]: "We have so much fun"
> Researcher: "You have fun and enjoy dressing up?"
> Alice B.: "Yes, it's our favorite game"
> Researcher: "And how does your game go?"
> Alice B.: "We put on the costume and become princesses"
> Researcher: "Is it always princess costumes, or do you use other ones too?"
> Alice B.: "Always princess" [Jhulia tries to echo her friend's words]
> Researcher: "You too, Jhulia?"
> Alice B.: "She just likes grabbing a colorful backpack"
> [Jhulia nods yes] (Narrative 1, Diary 2, Alice B., Jhulia, and Maria Joaquina, 2019)

There is a critical view regarding the fact that most costumes available in early childhood education are said to be for girls, potentially excluding boys from this experience. This issue may be linked to the common perception that imaginative play is meant for girls, whereas boys are expected to engage in activities related to the world of work, such as playing doctor, police officer, or firefighter—professions with an intellectual rather than dreamy or fantastical nature.

According to Kishimoto (2010), the differentiation between boys' and girls' play is not based on biology, but is instead a cultural construction. The author argues that when no separation is made between boys' and girls' play, the result is a broader acquisition of the full spectrum of existing childhood culture.

The findings raise concerns about the transition between educational stages in terms of educational continuity—what Formosinho (2016) highlights as the need to pay attention to the differences between the two school cultures, especially regarding organizational, institutional, and pedagogical practices. Each stage should not represent a cultural rupture; the experiences lived in early childhood education should not be deemed irrelevant to first grade, nor should early childhood be seen merely as a preparatory phase (a transmissive culture, as Formosinho emphasizes), especially for literacy in the early years. In other words, role-play with costumes as part of social role exploration may still be practiced in preschool, but in first grade, the school culture imposes and subjects the child to a routine of bodily 'incarceration' in favor of the 'use of the wrist' for literacy, reducing the body's engagement to mere hand movements.

The excessive pedagogical concern with literacy acquisition in elementary school distances the child from experiencing the world of make-believe at school, leaving play mostly restricted to recess or physical education classes. This does not mean underestimating the importance of learning to read and write, but rather recognizing the opportunities that play can offer for such learning, as well as for other curricular components. Play can thus be seen as a highly motivating means for learning.

There is also a concern about the fact that most references to dress-up and fantasy play appear in the narratives of girls, potentially suggesting an exclusion of boys from this type of ludic activity. Even considering that most of the research participants were girls (10 girls and 3 boys), it is worth noting that there were no narratives from boys about wearing costumes, playing princess, or participating in circle games.

Gender roles were strongly reflected in the play narratives involving dress-up games. This may be related to the common view that imagination-based play and characters such as princesses (as opposed to superheroes) are for girls, whereas boys are expected to engage in play related to the world of work, such as doctors, police officers, or firefighters—professions with an intellectual rather than dreamy or fanciful connotation.

The cultural division of games into those considered "for boys" and "for girls" is a social construct that needs to be challenged. Play cannot influence a child's sexual orientation, as such a connotation does not exist for them. The gender distinctions found in the play, separating what is viewed as "boy games" and "girl games," are deeply rooted in societal common sense.

According to Kishimoto (2010), when there is no separation between boys' and girls' games, children gain greater access to the full range of already-established childhood culture, reducing or eliminating the risk of prejudice, gender bias, and cultural hierarchies. Playing princess among girls reveals a ludic culture that mirrors a broader cultural division between male and female roles and social representations. The princess reflects a social representation of beauty, delicacy, love, flawless action, and charm. Brougère (1998, p. 5) emphasizes that every game requires a social context, shared meanings, and opportunities for interpretation—in other words, culture. A culture that imposes on girls experiences framed by delicacy, completeness, beauty, and gentleness.

Unlike the symbolic markers seen in make-believe play, the results show that tag and hide-and-seek (rulebased games) were mentioned more frequently by children in both early childhood education and first grade. The tag was especially highlighted as a common game during physical education classes in early elementary school, illustrating the influence of these moments in shaping school play culture and providing opportunities for full-body engagement.

> Rex: "We play on the wooden playground; we play hide-and-seek" [as Rex talks, Murilo speaks at the same time, trying to say the same things Rex is saying].
> Murilo: "We play tag"
> Rex: "A bunch of things" [gesturing with his hand to show there are many things] "But I run to burn calories"
> Daniel: "In the sand"
> Murilo: "In the sand, sand"
> Rex: "In the sand" [agreeing with his friends].
> (Narrative 1, diary 5, Daniel, Murilo, and Rex, 2019).

Catch-and-go games, playing in the sand, and the large wooden playground structure were described as activities present both in early childhood education and in the first year of elementary school by both boys and girls. The transition between school cycles shows that it is the child who moves, and they carry with them their desires, preferences, and ways of living in childhood. In other words, childhood is not left behind in early childhood education when a child moves on to 1st grade. This implies recognizing that the playful culture, which is central to the child's way of being, is not abandoned. There is no substitution of the child by a student, nor of their interests or ways of playing and relating to others. It is the 'whole child' who transitions into 1st grade, along with the learning acquired in their previous stage.

This aspect aligns with the proposition by Formosinho et al. (2016), who argue that transitions between educational cycles should be seen as educational continuity between early childhood education and elementary school. Learning is continuous and ongoing, just like childhood and its lived experiences, which are not lost during these transitions.

The forms, rules, and contexts of "tag" games (such as tag and hide-and-seek) revealed the cumulative nature of cultural reproduction. Each time the games are played, they allow new meaning-making of the traditional play culture. These games were likely learned through participation, observation, or cultural transmission, and since each child may have learned differently and with different rules, the transitions between contexts—and even school cycles—carry those variations. Another important element of these games is the full-body movement and the interactions among children. Children learn and develop through interaction with their bodies, other bodies, and human-made objects, with a focus on the social relationships formed within institutional life.

This means acknowledging that the transition cannot overlook the living child who moves between the two school cultures. As Formosinho (2016) emphasizes, one cannot impose cultural ruptures during transitions by disregarding the being child, who plays as their most intense and preferred life activity. Play is both a need and a learning mechanism in early childhood and early elementary education. This need does not cease to exist in 1st grade—there should be no "formal education" of the child's body, nor should embodied experimentation be reduced to the "use of the wrist" during literacy instruction.

Beyond catch-and-go games, another playful activity highlighted in the narratives was playing in the sandboxes. In the city's Early Childhood Education Centers, a rotation system was established to ensure equal access to physical spaces for all classes. Thus, particularly in preschool, sand play was frequently mentioned, with children recalling different sandboxes within the institution. These narratives showed that play in these areas extended beyond interaction with the sand itself—they often involved social role-play, reinforcing symbolic play as a dominant activity for young children.

> Researcher: "What else do you play here at school?"
> Jhulia: "Sand" [quickly replies]
> Alice B.: "Sand" [answers similarly]
> Jhulia: "Sand, and now we're playing with playdough."
> Alice B.: "It's when..." [another child starts to speak but lowers her voice as the other continues]
> Alice B.: "Playdough is our favorite and calm thing that I like."
> Jhulia [placing her hand on her friend's shoulder]: "I like dressing up."
> Researcher: "And what are the games like here at school?"
> Alice B.: "It's really nice."
> Jhulia [repeating what Alice B. said and then adding]: "It's really nice, really fun."
> Researcher: "And what do you play when you're in the sandbox?"
> Jhulia: "We play mom, daughter."
> (Narrative 2, Diary 4, Alice B. and Jhulia, 2019)

The interest in playgrounds with sand is a privilege of Brazilian public early childhood schools, highlighting a difference in spatial organization and structure between institutions. The sand play was exclusive to early childhood education, as elementary schools lacked sandboxes or sandy areas. This architectural distinction illustrates a broader conceptual difference—early childhood education is seen as a space for play, while elementary school is seen as a space for study (especially free play).

The last example of play culture intensely narrated was the so-called "wooden playground structure" (brinquedão de madeira). It refers to a large wooden play structure located in one of the center's sandboxes—resembling a wooden playground with swings, slides, seesaws, climbing nets, and more.

> Researcher: "And what else do you play? What games do you play?"
> Manoela: "The wooden playground."
> Researcher: "And what do you play there?"
> Manoela: "We..." [pauses to think and is interrupted by her friend]
> Julinha: "We slide, swing, and..." [pause] "and go up, down, up, down, up, down" [laughing and making a hand motion of going up and down].
> (Narrative 2, Diary 1, Julinha and Manoela, 2019)

Whenever it was mentioned, the "wooden playground" was associated with favorite activities and toys at school. This narrative, too, only emerged from children in early childhood education, as the equipment was exclusive to that institution's playgrounds.

Finally, when discussing play as a promoter of learning, we are not only referring to ludic activities with didactic or systematized goals but also—and especially—to free and spontaneous play. This does not mean there is no pedagogical intentionality or that there are no learning goals or competencies to be acquired, but rather that the child has the autonomy to explore, experiment, invent, discover, and create—within the broader context of acquiring certain skills.

Final Considerations

The objective of this study was to examine and critically reflect—through children's narratives—on play during the transition between school stages (from early childhood education to the 1st grade of elementary school). When narrating their favorite games, the ones they played most often, and their "dream school," the children highlighted symbolic games, play in playgrounds or sandboxes, and games involving the whole body in large outdoor spaces, such as tag/chasing games, competitive games, and water-related activities (such as the desire for a school with a swimming pool). Pretend play involving characters like princesses was also identified as central to their play, with toys especially emphasized by girls and more prevalent during early childhood education. In the transition to 1st grade, the school was recalled as having fewer play structures and sandboxes, as well as the persistent "dream" of a swimming pool.

This is a collaborative study aimed at proposing more successful strategies to support transitions between school cycles. In this sense, the findings reveal the need to structurally and curricularly consider aspects of children's learning as an educational continuum rather than a break between school cultures and children's experiences. Therefore, disregarding the presence of childhood in 1st grade is an issue that must be overcome, since the playful child is the same one who attended early childhood education and is now advancing to elementary school.

Learning is a *continuum*, and play experiences (among others) lived in early childhood education should not be ignored or abolished in the 1st grade. This means that the way children live their childhood and view the world— through play and embodied action—remains relevant in elementary school. However, this does not mean disregarding the specificities of each educational stage, which must be guided by the BNCC (Brazil's National Common Curriculum Base) and the National Curriculum Guidelines.

A child in 1st grade does not stop being a child and instantly becomes a student; rather, through concrete experiences with knowledge, they gradually acquire hypothetical thinking, which should be encouraged—including through play-based mediation. Interest in play persists in the 1st grade, and according to constructivist frameworks, learning is a spiral in which previous stages support rather than exclude the next steps.

Ensuring successful transitions from early childhood education to 1st grade requires partnerships between professionals in both school stages and families, aiming to establish a praxis of continuity—not rupture or distancing— between curriculum and practice. It is the child who transitions to an active and thinking subject, continuing to learn through play, which remains their preferred activity. Play must be understood as a right, not merely a need for the child, and the physical environments in early elementary school should reflect this right, including outdoor social spaces such as well-equipped sand playgrounds. Moreover, it is not enough for such environments to exist if children are only allowed to play during recess or physical education classes.

This study contributes to the appreciation of children's voices, as their narratives revealed key vulnerabilities—especially in elementary school—since the play was confined to limited moments, mainly physical education classes. The children highlighted differences in how the two stages of basic education are organized and expressed these differences through their experiences with play. Beyond reduced playtime in 1st grade, the findings point to notable differences in how environments are structured in early childhood education compared to elementary school.

This research also offers contributions to the field of educational research itself, as it studied children and their cultures through their voices. Moreover, it addressed a still underexplored topic in the literature—school transition—through children's narratives. The authors hope these findings will inspire further questions and generate new studies that contribute to building more successful and meaningful transitions between educational stages involving children.

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